

4. Evaluating Sources (Overview)

To provide your students with a broad overview of the principles of evaluating sources, refer to the following materials:

- Video: What is Authority?
- Video: Evaluating Sources
- Video: Introduction to Bias
- Video: Types of Bias
- Video: Interpreting Images

DISCUSSION TOPICS

Evaluating Information

Begin a real-world conversation about evaluation. Examples may include medical topics, large purchases, news sources, social media, mockumentaries, gossip, etc. Ask students how they would go about evaluating information they find on Twitter, Facebook, or other social media platforms. Have students ever encountered a documentary or mockumentary? How did they tell the difference? Do students question news sources? Do they look at multiple sources of information when encountering a news story that catches their interests? Investigate those sources for motives or bias before accepting their version?

The Importance of Using Scholarly Sources

Why do scholarly sources matter? When and why are they more useful than non-scholarly information?

Evaluation Criteria

Discuss what authority means. Why do credentials or academic/research associations matter? What about the author's background and/or publication history? Does the publisher matter? Why or why not? This might be a good place to take a look at predatory publishers.

Accuracy

Can the information be verified via cited sources? Does it agree with other sources? If not, do students conduct more research? Has information about methodology been included? How much time do students put into determining accuracy? Are there time constraints? Are there shortcuts?

Currency

Is currency important for your subject or topic? Can you determine when the information was produced or published? If the information is outdated, but otherwise applicable to your project, look for more

recent work from the same author. Does the information need to be examined from a historical or cultural perspective?

Relevance

Is the scope appropriate for your topic? What is the focus? What information is included and/or excluded? If it describes research, is there information about the sample used in the research? Is the sample representative of the population?

Objectivity

What is the purpose of the work? Does the work offer facts, opinions, or a combination? What is the tone of the work? What assumptions does it make?

Audience

Is this a scholarly publication? Trade information? General? If it is a web page, is it part of a larger site? Is there an expectation of prior knowledge or assumptions?

Evaluating Non-Scholarly Sources

The same principles apply as to scholarly sources, but with less emphasis on scholarly information requirement. For non-scholarly resources, including alternative types of digital media like podcasts or video logs, make sure to understand the motivation of the information provider. Ask questions and verify information across multiple resources.

ACTIVITIES

Evaluating a Source

Ask students to find 2 unacceptable sources and 1 that is acceptable on a topic relevant to an academic assignment. They should write a paragraph or essay describing the evaluation process, their observations, and decision for each of the 3 sources. If time permits, have students share reasons for finding a site unacceptable for an academic assignment.

Visual Evaluation

Pick an article with an image from a local print newspaper or from an online piece of journalism. Give the students 2 to 5 minutes to read the article and ask them to write a 1-minute essay about how the image contributes to the story. Have students share their findings with the class or in small groups.