

Initial Appraisal of Information Sources

It is possible to begin appraising a source even before reading the content. Examining the bibliographic citation of a source is a useful preliminary step to begin sorting material for further evaluation. The bibliographic citation is the written description of a book, journal article, essay, or some other published material that appears in a catalog, index, or database. Bibliographic citations generally include the author, title, and publication information. Bibliographic citation should help in obtaining key information about the author, date of publication, edition or revision, publisher, and journal title.

The Author

- What are the author's credentials? Where does he or she work? What is his or her educational background and academic experience? What has the author written in the past? Much of this information can be obtained through a web search or searching the author in an academic database.
- Has the author's name been mentioned in lectures or cited in other sources or bibliographies? Reputable authors are frequently cited by other academic scholars.
- Is the author associated with a reputable institution or organization? What are the basic values or goals of the organization or institution?

Date of Publication

- When was the source published? Is the source current or out-of-date for the given topic? Some topic areas of continuing and rapid development, such as the sciences, demand current information. Conversely, topics in the humanities often require material that was written many years ago.

Publisher

- Note the publisher. If the source is published by a university press, it is likely to be scholarly. Although the fact that the publisher is reputable does not necessarily guarantee quality, it does show that the publisher may have high regard for the source being published.

Scholarly vs. Popular Sources

- Is the source scholarly or popular? The distinction between scholarly and popular sources is important, as it indicates different levels of complexity in conveying ideas. Generally, a scholarly source has been reviewed and evaluated by other academics and experts in that topic area before being published. Popular sources, although sometimes useful, are not subject to the same review process and, therefore, are usually less authoritative. If it is difficult to determine whether a source is scholarly or popular, consult with a professor in that field or a librarian.

Content Analysis

After making an initial appraisal of a source, next examine the body of the source. If the source is a book, read the preface to determine the author's intentions for the book, scan the table of contents and the index to get a broad overview of the material it covers, and note whether bibliographies are included. Read chapters that specifically address a chosen topic. For journal articles, read the abstract, introduction, sub-headings, and conclusion to determine which sections are most relevant to the selected topic. Scanning the table of contents of

Critically Analyzing Information Sources

a journal or magazine issue is also useful. As with books, the presence and quality of a bibliography at the end of the article may reflect the care with which the authors have prepared their work.

Intended Audience

- What type of audience is the author addressing? Is the publication aimed at a specialized or a general audience? Is the source too elementary, too technical, or too advanced for the research being conducted?

Objective Reasoning

- Is the information covered fact, opinion, or propaganda? It is not always easy to separate fact from opinion. Facts can usually be verified; opinions, though they may be based on factual information, evolve from the interpretation of facts. Skilled writers can make opinions appear as facts.
- Does the information appear to be valid and well-researched, or is it questionable and unsupported by evidence? Assumptions should be reasonable. Note errors or omissions.
- Are the ideas and arguments advanced more or less in line with other works on the same topic? The more radically an author departs from the views of others in the same field, the more carefully and critically the work should be scrutinized.
- Is the author's point of view objective and impartial? Is the language free of bias?

Coverage

- Does the work update other sources, substantiate other materials, or add new information? Does it extensively or marginally cover the research topic? Enough sources should be read to obtain a variety of viewpoints.
- Is the material primary or secondary in nature? Primary sources are the raw material of the research process. Secondary sources are based on primary sources. For example, a journal article presenting new findings would be considered a primary source; a journal article reviewing existing research would be considered a secondary source. Other examples of primary sources include diaries, speeches, manuscripts, letters, interviews, news film footage, autobiographies, and official records. Other examples of secondary sources include textbooks, magazine articles, histories, criticisms, commentaries, and encyclopedias. It is best to use a mixture of primary and secondary sources if possible.

Writing Style

- Is the publication organized logically? Are the main points clearly presented? Is the text easy to read, or is it stilted or choppy? Is the author's argument repetitive?

Evaluative Reviews

- Locate critical reviews of books in a reviewing source, such as *Book Review Index*, *Book Review Digest*, or *ProQuest Research Library*. Is the review positive? Is the book under review considered a valuable contribution to the field? Does the reviewer mention other books that might be better? If so, locate these sources for more information on the topic.
- Do the various reviewers agree on the value or attributes of the book or has it aroused controversy among the critics?
- For websites, consider consulting one of the evaluations and reviewing sources on the Internet.