

Evaluating Information

When considering whether you should trust information from a book, article, website, etc, and use it for your college-level research paper, you might use the following evaluation criteria:

Audience

Who is the intended audience for the information being presented? Some information is aimed at children or young adults—and may therefore be over-simplified. Some resources, like newspapers and radio programs are aimed at the public, so that information is presented in a very general way. Some magazines or websites, like “Computers Today” might be aimed at those who are already somewhat knowledgeable on a topic. While still other types of resources, like journals, dissertations, trade newsletters, or professional reports are aimed at communicating with people who already have some expertise.

Authority

Who is the person – or organization -- responsible for compiling and presenting the information? Check to see if there is information available on the author or authors. Do they have any special experience or degrees that might make them a more reliable source than someone else? If you cannot find an individual author (or editor, or artist or director) is there a sponsoring organization that might be considered reliable?

Fact or Opinion?

While opinions can be important in shaping our world, rigorous research aims at finding the facts before making statements about interpretation of facts. Facts are verifiable. Opinions might appeal to emotion, beliefs, cultural values, and they might be *supportable by facts*, but -- ultimately -- opinions are open to argument.

Fact: Michael Bloomberg succeeded Rudy Giuliani as Mayor of New York City.”

Opinion: “Michael Bloomberg is the best Mayor New York City ever had.”

Bias

Related to the fact/opinion assessment is the evaluation of bias. A source might present only facts, yet still be biased. In evaluating your source note whether the authors are presenting only those facts which support their assertion, or appealing only to those authorities who are in agreement. Are any other viewpoints, including contrary or conflicting viewpoints being considered? Are contrary facts being addressed?

Currency / Timeliness

Another evaluative element, and one that is related to factual support, is the timeliness of the facts being presented. If an argument relies on demographic statistics to prove a point about immigration, the arguments ought to be based on the most recent information available. *Natural and social sciences* often require use of the most up-to-date resources. *Humanities* research may use both older and newer resources. While many resources in Philosophy or Literature may be “timeless” in what they assert, carefully consider whether the resource that supports *your* thesis statement has a “time-sensitive” element, where a more current resource may be necessary. For example, while the Catholic church has had a long history of defending capital punishment, a religion research paper on the topic ought to include recent resources that address clarifications on *carrying out* the death penalty. (made in the 1997 Catechism, #2265-2267).

References

References help an audience to verify the facts of an argument, and can be a good indicator of the quality of the author’s research. Check whether your resource offers citations and references. Use them to evaluate authority and timeliness, noted above. Do they indicate bias? Are the references geared to a sophisticated audience? Do they provide readers with the complete information they would need if they wanted to verify the facts as stated by the author, or if they wanted to learn more about the topic?