

How To Critically Analyze Information Sources

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Permission to adapt this web site, originally developed by the Reference Department; Instruction, Research, and Information Services (IRIS); Cornell University Library, is gratefully acknowledged.

INTRODUCTION

You can begin evaluating information sources, such as books or articles, even before you have the physical item in hand. Examine a source by first checking the bibliographic citation. The bibliographic citation is the written description of a book, journal article, or some other published material that appears in a library catalog(OPAC) or an article database (ProQuest). Bibliographic citations generally have three main parts: author, title, and publication information.

These parts can help you determine the usefulness of this source for your paper. (In the same way, you can appraise a Web site by examining the home page carefully.)

INITIAL APPRAISAL

Author

a) What are the author's credentials (in other words which university, college or organization is he or she affiliated with?), educational background, past writings, or experience? Is the book or article written on a topic in the author's area of expertise?

b) Has your instructor mentioned this author? Have you seen the author's name cited in other sources or bibliographies? Respected authors are cited frequently by other scholars. For this reason, always note those names that appear in many different sources.

c) Is the author associated with a reputable institution or organization?

Date of Publication

a) When was this work published? The date is often located on the face of the title page below the name of the publisher or the online catalog entry. On Web pages, the date of the last revision is usually at the bottom of the home page, sometimes every page.

c) Is the source current or out-of-date for your topic? Topic areas that continually develop, such as the sciences, demand more current information. On the other hand, topics in the humanities often require material that was written many years ago.

Edition or Revision

Is this a first edition of this publication or not? Further editions indicate a source has been revised and updated to reflect changes in knowledge, include omissions, and harmonize with its intended reader's needs. Also, many printings or editions may indicate that the work has become a standard source in the area and is reliable. This also applies to Web source.

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.

Title of Journal

Is this a scholarly or a popular journal? This differentiation is important because it displays different levels of depth in delivering ideas.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Books: Having made an initial appraisal, you should now examine the body of the source. 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. Note whether bibliographies are included. Read the chapters that specifically address your topic.

Articles: Scanning the table of contents of a journal or magazine issue is also useful. Scan through the citation, abstract and content breakdown of a full-text online article. As with books, the presence and quality of a bibliography or reference list 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 this source too elementary, too technical, too advanced, or just right for your needs?

Objective Reasoning

a) Is the information covered **fact, opinion, or propaganda**?

Facts can usually be verified; opinions, though they may be based on factual information, they evolve from the interpretation of facts. Skilled writers can make you think their interpretations are facts.

b) Does the information appear to be valid and well-researched, or is it questionable and unsupported?

c) Are the ideas and arguments advanced more or less in line with other works you have read on the same topic?

The more radically an author departs from the views of others in the same field, the more carefully and critically you should scrutinize his or her ideas.

d) Is the author's point of view objective and impartial? Is the language free of emotion-arousing words and bias?

Coverage

a) Does the work update other sources, substantiate other materials you have read, or add new information?

b) 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, if you were researching Konrad Adenauer's role in rebuilding West Germany after World War II, **Adenauer's own writings would be one of many primary sources available on this topic.** Others might include relevant government documents and contemporary German newspaper articles. Scholars use this primary material to help generate historical interpretations--a secondary source.

Books, encyclopedia articles, and scholarly journal articles about Adenauer's role are considered secondary sources. In the sciences, journal articles and conference proceedings written by experimenters reporting the results of their research are primary documents. Choose both primary and secondary sources when you have the opportunity.

Writing Style

Is the publication organized logically? Are the main points clearly presented? Do you find the text easy to read, or is it awkward? Is the author's argument repetitive?

Evaluative Reviews

Use [ProQuest](#) to locate critical reviews of books.

a) Find out if the book under review is 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 your topic.

b) Do the various reviewers agree on the value or qualities of the book or has it aroused controversy among the critics?

c) For Web sites, consult [Evaluating Web Sources](#) For more assistance with the research process, consult your instructor or a reference librarian.

For guidance in preparing and writing an annotated bibliography, see [How to Prepare an Annotated Bibliography](#).

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