

PART 4: EVALUATING INFORMATION

Hello and welcome to Part 4 of Research 101. I'm Christy Stevens, and today we're going to talk about evaluating information.

WHAT IS EVALUATION?

Evaluation is a process in which you systematically analyze something to determine its quality, significance, or relevance. Evaluation can be about determining whether something is good or bad, useful or useless, accurate or inaccurate. But often times, life just isn't that black and white and we're faced not with either/ors but with gradations of usefulness and quality that force us to figure out the degree to which something is useful. In other cases, usefulness is context dependent. In other words, the thing in question could be useful in some circumstances but not in others.

When conducting research, it is important to evaluate the sources you find to determine not only their quality, but also their relevance to your specific research project. This is true of websites, which are notoriously uneven in quality, but it is also true of library resources, including books and articles.

Make sure to ask yourself the following questions:

- HOW DOES THIS SOURCE HELP YOU TO ADDRESS YOUR RESEARCH QUESTION/THESIS?
- HOW DOES THIS SOURCE HELP YOU TO MEET THE SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS IN YOUR ASSIGNMENT?
- DOES THIS SOURCE PROVIDE RELEVANT INFORMATION ON YOUR TOPIC?
- IS THIS SOURCE SUPPORTING YOUR POINT OF VIEW OR IS IT PROVIDING A POINT OF VIEW ON YOUR TOPIC THAT IS DIFFERENT FROM YOUR OWN AND THAT YOU WILL NEED TO ADDRESS AS A COUNTERARGUMENT?
- IS THE SOURCE GOING TO PROVIDE YOU WITH THE TYPE OF INFORMATION (FACTS, STATS, ANALYSIS, COMMENTARY, HISTORICAL INFORMATION, EMPIRICAL RESEARCH, BACKGROUND INFORMATION, ETC.) THAT YOUR TOPIC REQUIRES?

EVALUATING WEB SITES

When you go online and do a Google search, it is particularly important to evaluate the websites you find. Books and journal articles have editors and publishers who evaluate the content and act as gatekeepers, preventing the publication of inaccurate and poor quality material. In contrast, anyone can put up content on the web. This means you need to spend time evaluating any web site before you use it for your research assignments.

To effectively evaluate a site, you'll need to look at different parts of the site and examine the site from different angles.

One good place to start is the website's address. In particular, it can be useful to take note of the domain. Common domains include .com, .org, .gov, .edu, .net, but there are a variety of others. They often roughly correspond to specific types of content. So let's take a look at a few types of sites and the domains with which they are usually associated.

Educational (.edu, .museum): .edu sites are published by educational institutions, like CPP, but that doesn't necessarily mean that everything you find there will be high quality resources. Edu sites might offer high quality research findings from experts in the field but students are also often allowed to publish pages on a college's domain. An entire class might publish their research papers, for example, including those who ended up receiving poor grades on their projects. The lesson here is that .edu sites often contain both excellent information produced by experts as well as poor quality information produced by novices..

Governmental (.gov or .mil) .gov and .mil are U.S. government and military sites. The purpose is to inform the public about government related information. They are generally very reliable and they can be a particularly good place to find statistics.

Organizations (.org) Sites sponsored by an organization are generally advocating for a position or cause. You might find some great information on such sites, but you might find some decidedly biased information as well.

News (.com) There are a variety of types of news sites out there, such as web versions of traditional newspapers, like the New York Times, and television news programming. They are often updated multiple times a day. But there are also news sites published by extremely biased organizations that you would want to avoid, as well as by student groups, which aren't particularly high quality journalism.

Commercial or Entertainment (.com, .biz, .net or .org) Commercial sites are created by businesses and they are designed to sell products. That product could be anything from perfume to Prozac, but it could also be a site that makes a profit through web advertising. Since these sites are designed to sell you something, they are often pretty biased.

Personal (.edu, .org, .net or .com) Personal webpages can be published on almost any domain. It's generally best to avoid such sites, unless you know that it is a personal site of an expert in a particular field.

EVALUATING CONTENT

So the domain of the URL can give you some clues about what kind of a site it is, but you'll still need to do some evaluating to determine whether the information on the site is accurate and reliable. Librarians at Chico State developed the "CRAAP Test" to help you do just that. The CRAAP Test consists of a list of questions you can ask in order to determine if the information you've found is reliable.

C STANDS FOR CURRENCY, or the timeliness of the information you've found. Questions to ask yourself include:

- WHEN WAS THE INFORMATION PUBLISHED OR POSTED?
- HAS THE INFORMATION BEEN REVISED OR UPDATED?
- IS THE INFORMATION CURRENT OR OUT-OF-DATE FOR YOUR TOPIC?
- ARE THE LINKS FUNCTIONAL?

THE R STANDS FOR RELEVANCE, or the importance of the information for your needs. Ask yourself:

- DOES THE INFORMATION RELATE TO YOUR TOPIC OR ANSWER YOUR QUESTION?
- WHO IS THE INTENDED AUDIENCE?
- IS THE INFORMATION AT AN APPROPRIATE LEVEL (I.E. NOT TOO ELEMENTARY OR ADVANCED FOR YOUR NEEDS)?
- HAVE YOU LOOKED AT A VARIETY OF SOURCES BEFORE DETERMINING THIS IS ONE YOU WILL USE?
- WOULD YOU BE COMFORTABLE USING THIS SOURCE FOR A RESEARCH PAPER?

THE 1ST A STANDS FOR AUTHORITY.

- WHO IS THE AUTHOR/PUBLISHER/SOURCE/SPONSOR?
- ARE THE AUTHOR'S CREDENTIALS OR ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS GIVEN?
- WHAT ARE THE AUTHOR'S QUALIFICATIONS TO WRITE ON THE TOPIC?
- IS THERE CONTACT INFORMATION, SUCH AS A PUBLISHER OR EMAIL ADDRESS?

THE 2ND A STANDS FOR ACCURACY, or the reliability, truthfulness, and correctness of the informational content.

- WHERE DOES THE INFORMATION COME FROM?
- IS THE INFORMATION SUPPORTED BY EVIDENCE?
- HAS THE INFORMATION BEEN REVIEWED OR REFEREED?
- CAN YOU VERIFY ANY OF THE INFORMATION IN ANOTHER SOURCE OR FROM PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE?
- DOES THE LANGUAGE OR TONE SEEM BIASED AND FREE OF EMOTION?
- ARE THERE SPELLING, GRAMMAR, OR OTHER TYPOGRAPHICAL ERRORS?

FINALLY, P STANDS FOR PURPOSE, or the reason the information exists.

- WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE INFORMATION? TO INFORM? TO TEACH? TO SELL? TO ENTERTAIN? TO PERSUADE?
- DO THE AUTHORS/SPONSORS MAKE THEIR INTENTIONS OR PURPOSE CLEAR?
- IS THE INFORMATION FACT? OPINION? PROPAGANDA?
- DOES THE POINT OF VIEW APPEAR OBJECTIVE AND IMPARTIAL?
- ARE THERE POLITICAL, IDEOLOGICAL, CULTURAL, RELIGIOUS, INSTITUTIONAL, OR PERSONAL BIASES?

The CRAAP test also works for books and articles. Not everyone can get a book or article published by reputable publishers, so there is some quality control already in place when searching for books and articles. Also, if you check-out a book from the library, you know that both the book's editor and a librarian have evaluated the book. The editor decided it was worth publishing and the librarian decided it was worth including in the library's collection.

Although these are important clues about the value of a given book, you still need to evaluate its relevance to your particular research project. Specifically, you'll want to make sure that you are getting information that is timely. Some topics, such as scientific and technical ones, will require you to get the most up-to-date information possible, while other topics, like public perceptions of prohibition, might lead you to search for historical documents, such as old newspaper articles.

You'll also want to make sure the information is relevant to your topic. For books, look through the table of contents and read the introduction. For articles, look to the title for clues, and then read the abstract, or summary, when available. Also think about the purpose of the book or article. Why was it written? Does it address your topic? Does it support your point of view? Does it provide useful counterarguments for you to explore?

You'll also want to think about authority. Do a Google search for the author. Is the person a scholar or expert in the field? Also look at the publisher. If it's a book, who published it? A University Press? They tend to produce higher quality scholarly materials than many other publishers. If it's an article, was it published in a newspaper, magazine, or scholarly journal? Is it a reputable newspaper, like the New York Times, or a tabloid, like the National Enquirer? Is it a magazine like Time, which publishes articles for a general audience, or is it a scholarly journal, which contains articles written by and for an academic audience?

WHEN EVALUATING THE USEFULNESS OF A PARTICULAR JOURNAL ARTICLE FOR YOUR RESEARCH PROJECT, THINK ABOUT THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

What type of article is this? Is this an empirical study in which the authors employed the scientific method to test a hypothesis? Is it a literature review, which discusses other people's research on a specific topic? Is it a theoretical analysis of an issue, text, or problem? Is it an argument that advocates for a particular perspective or point of view? What type of article best suits your topic?

Check out the references at the end of the article and ask yourself whether any would be useful for your project.

What theories and basic assumptions does the text rely upon? Are they similar to/different from your own? Do they support or undermine your own point of view, argument, or theory?

Keep in mind that research is often recursive, which means it's usually not a onetime thing but rather an ongoing process. Once you begin the processes of evaluating your sources and using the information you find in them in your research project, you might find that you need to go back and do

more research to find additional information to back up your points or to address strong counter arguments.

CONCLUSION

We've reached the end of Part 3 of Research 101, so let's review what we've learned. We've discussed a number of categories to look at when evaluating websites: currency, relevance, authority, accuracy, and purpose. Evaluating a source in terms of each of these categories is particularly important with websites, since anyone can put up a web page. However, it is always important to evaluate more authoritative sources like academic books and scholarly journal articles in terms of their usefulness to your particular project.

To learn strategies for using and citing information ethically and responsibly, please proceed to Part 5.