

The Concept: Why Assessing Sources Is Important

What?

Assessing sources is the process of determining the usefulness of a source for reading and research purposes. Useful sources are accessible to you as a reader, relevant to your inquiry questions and research topic, and credible, or believable. To determine if a source is useful, you also need to examine the perspective the author takes, any biases the source might contain, and the accuracy of the information the source includes.

When?

You assess a source by considering if it will be useful to your research or to informing your personal or civic life. Before you read the source closely, you can investigate information about the text's author, publisher, date of publication, title, and other details that might help determine if you will use the text as a potential source. As you read, you can use questions and a strategic process to help you determine if the source is accessible and interesting to you as a reader, if it is relevant to your research, if it is a rich and accurate source of information, and if it is a credible source with limited bias.

Why?

As a reader, student, researcher, and citizen, you will continually need to assess the texts you encounter, particularly when you are conducting research more independently. Assessing sources is a key step in conducting research effectively because using relevant, accurate, and reliable sources increases the likelihood that your research will be successful and brings credibility to your research findings. The quality and credibility of your sources also influence whether a critical reader will believe what you present.

The Process: Assessing a Source's Usefulness

Use a strategic reading process and relevant questions to guide you as you assess your sources.

Assess the Source's Accessibility and Interest

To be useful, a source should be accessible to you—one you can understand—meaningful and interesting. An initial stage of assessing a source involves determining its accessibility and your interest in it. Consider your initial experience in reading the text, how well you understand it, and whether it seems to be a meaningful potential source.

1. Skim the source's information to determine whether you can comprehend it.
2. Pay attention to the source's sentences and vocabulary, and to whether you have the background knowledge to understand what it says. Consider what other information you need to know in order to understand the words and ideas the text contains.
3. Focus initially on sources that are relatively easy for you to read and understand. As you build your background knowledge through research, you can then move to more challenging sources.
4. As you read through the text, determine if you find it to be an interesting and useful potential source. If so, include it in your initial collection of research sources, and assess the text more closely for its relevance, accuracy, and richness.

Assess the Source's Relevance and Richness

The information presented in a source should be relevant to your research and relatively rich in detail. As you examine a source more closely, consider its relationship to your topic and purpose, its alignment with your research questions, and the scope and richness of its information.

1. Consider whether the source's information addresses your research questions specifically, and how well it aligns with the purposes of your research. A relevant source is one that closely relates to the topic and questions you are researching.
2. Determine whether the source is rich in information. Identify and select sources that are rich in content, add to your knowledge of the topic, and complement your growing collection of relevant sources and information.
3. Once you have determined that the source is accessible, interesting, relevant, and rich, assess whether the source is also credible and accurate, crucial components to determining a source's value for your research purposes.

Assess the Source's Perspective, Credibility, and Bias

As you assess a source more rigorously, determine the author's and publisher's perspective, bias, and credibility or believability.

1. Examine the language and information presented in the source for clues to the perspective, the way the author views the topic. In research, it is best to have sources that reflect a range of perspectives, rather than only those that match your own.
2. To initially determine a source's credibility, weigh a few factors: publisher, date of publication, author, and type of text. The source's type (e.g., article, media, blogpost) often signals a source's level of credibility. For example, a peer-reviewed scientific journal article is more likely to be credible than a blog post.
3. Look into both the publisher and the author to determine their backgrounds and relevant expertise, and to what degree they might be biased. For a web-based source, you can often do this through the "about" links on the site. While every author and publisher will be biased to some extent, it is important to know what perspectives they hold, how those perspectives might influence their positions, and whether or not their bias is so strong that it impedes the credibility of the source.
4. Determine, as best you can, if the information presented appears to be accurate—if it comes from a reliable source and seems to be truthful. Later, you might need to do a deeper analysis of the accuracy of a source by checking it against other sources.

If, after this preliminary analysis and assessment, the source passes most of the tests, add it to your collection of sources and prepare to identify and write down information that is specifically relevant to your research questions.

Literacy Toolbox: Tools and Resources for Assessing Sources

Tools

Access and use these graphic organizers found in the Literacy Toolbox.

Potential Sources Tool

Use this tool to guide your process for assessing a source and determining whether it is a source that helps you advance your research.

Research Note-Taking Tool

Use this tool to help you take notes on sources you encounter while conducting research using inquiry questions. You might take notes as you begin your research and as your research and list of potential sources become more refined and purposeful.

Resources

Use the following resources found in this reference guide to help you assess sources during your research.

Guiding Questions for Assessing Sources

Use these sets of questions to guide your process for assessing sources until you become proficient at completing the steps without having to reference the questions themselves. Use these questions along with the **Potential Sources Tool** to help you consider a text's appropriateness for your purposes.

Assessing Online Sources: Additional Considerations

Use this resource when assessing online sources.

Analyzing a Text for Bias

Use this resource to better understand what the term *bias* means and how to detect bias in a source, another aspect of its credibility.

Guiding Questions for Assessing Sources

Note that these categories for assessing sources and most guiding questions are used on the **Potential Sources Tool**.

Accessibility and Interest Level	Guiding Questions
Accessibility to You as a Reader	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Am I able to read and comprehend the text easily? 2. What background knowledge do I need to understand the terminology, information, and ideas in the text?
Interest and Meaning for You as a Reader	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Does the text present ideas or information that I find interesting?
Relevance and Richness	Guiding Questions
Relevance to Topic & Purpose	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What information does the text provide on my topic?
Relevance to Research Objective	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. How does the text help me respond to my inquiry questions or achieve my research goals? 3. How does the text challenge or add to my current inquiry? 4. How might the text cause me to change my inquiry?
Scope and Richness	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. How extensive and supported is the information it provides? 6. How does the information in the text relate to other texts?
Credibility, Accuracy, and Bias	Guiding Questions
Publisher	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the publisher’s relationship to the topic area? 2. What economic stake might the publisher have in the topic area? 3. What political stake might the publisher have in the topic area?
Date	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. When was the text first published? 5. How current is the information on the topic? 6. How does the publishing date relate to the history of the topic?

ASSESSING SOURCES REFERENCE GUIDE

Credibility, Accuracy, and Bias	Guiding Questions
Author	<ol style="list-style-type: none">7. What are the author's qualifications that relate to the topic?8. What is the author's personal relationship to the topic?9. What economic or political stakes might the author have in the topic?10. Does the author demonstrate bias, and does it affect the integrity of the information?
Type	<ol style="list-style-type: none">11. What type of text is it: explanatory piece, informational article, feature, research study, op-ed, essay, argument, or something different?12. What is the purpose of the text with respect to the topic?
Accuracy	<ol style="list-style-type: none">13. Does the text provide accurate and current information?14. Does the author provide well-organized and clear evidence for the claims presented?15. Does the author cite sources when using statistics or making claims?16. Is the information based on opinion or fact?17. Can I corroborate the information with other sources?

Conclusions	Guiding Question
Conclusive Usability	Use your analysis to determine high, medium, or low ratings in each of the categories. Your ratings should help you determine whether you should use the source for your research.

Finding Additional Useful Sources

Once you have determined that a source is useful and reliable, you can use it as a jumping point for further research. To locate additional useful sources, use the following aspects of a reliable source:

- Use the source's bibliography, embedded references, and links to locate additional sources.
- Search people (e.g., authors, historical figures, academics, etc.), places, events, and ideas mentioned in the source.
- Use key words in the source to refine your inquiry questions and search for sources on the same topic.

Assessing Online Sources: Additional Considerations

When assessing online sources, there are some quick methods to identify initially reliable sources and to save time by knowing when to move on.

Guidance on Web Domains

Use the table to guide you as you begin familiarizing yourself with web searches. Remember that there are always exceptions to any of these guiding considerations.

Domain Type	Considerations	Examples
.edu (Education)	These are usually educational institutions and generally thought to be reliable. However, some institutions have strong perspectives and biases. These factors should be calculated and addressed if using their sources for research purposes.	Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: plato.stanford.edu Smithsonian Institution: si.edu
.gov (Government)	These are government websites that usually provide reliable factual and statistical information.	National Archives: archives.gov National Institutes of Health: nih.gov
.org (Organization)	Many organizations present credible and accurate information. However, many organizations have strong perspectives, agendas, and biases. These factors should be calculated and addressed if using their sources for research purposes.	American Museum of Natural History: amnh.org United Nations: un.org
.com (Commercial)	Many commercial entities are legitimate news agencies, though they have political, economical, and social perspectives and biases. However, “.coms” also include companies that have financial interests that influence their perspectives and positions on issues.	<i>The New York Times</i> : nytimes.com Nike: nike.com
“WordPress” or “blogger”	These usually signify personal blogs and may lack credible information. Facts and claims often go unverified on these sites and might misrepresent, misinterpret, or even present false information.	

Domain Type	Considerations	Examples
Social Media	While any kind of link can be sent via social media sites, including to legitimate sources of information, people also share unverified sources that spread falsehoods, misinformation, and even hateful information. Governments are becoming more aware of false parties who intentionally post falsehoods to influence people's opinions and positions. However, many organizations use social media to share credible information.	Facebook, Tumblr, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat

Pay Attention to a Website's Details

Assess the Website's Organization and Style

The source should have a consistent and professional style and layout. Pay attention to spacing, font size, citations, language (e.g., correct spelling and grammar) and other structuring features of the website.

Attend to Small Print

Locate and review the "About us," or "Contact us" pages of the website. A total lack of these sections might mean that the source or website is not a legitimate or serious source of information. Also, check to see if authors have been attributed for any articles or information given on the website.

Note Legal and Disclaimer Pages

Review the source's "Legal" or "Disclaimer" pages (if applicable). Many satirical websites disclose this information in those sections.

Take Note of Sensationalism

Sources with exaggerated or provocative headlines, and sources that use ALL CAPS in headlines or body text usually intend to create an emotional reader response.

Compare to Known Reliable Sources

Once you have identified a go-to credible source, you might use its details and features as a kind of test to assess other websites you come across during your searches. Major news organizations provide a good starting point to develop your reliability and credibility sensors.

Ensure Reliability

Not all news, information, or even videos found on the Internet come from reliable sources. Information may be untrue, skewed, distorted, or even completely made up. A phenomenon known as “deep fakes,” wherein very real images and video are entirely fabricated, has emerged. Follow a critical reading process to check on news sources and ensure their reliability.

- Rule out hoaxes by looking up the story in credibility checkers (e.g., Hoax-Slayer, Snopes, FactCheck.org, Fact Checker).
- Rule out photo manipulation by doing a Google reverse image search to see if you can discover the source of an image and its possible variations.
- Question and investigate the validity of any source of information that does not have an author, publisher, or date of publication.
- Websites, such as mediabiaschart.com and allsides.com, provide information and ratings to help consider a variety of sources from different perspectives.

Check on News Sources

Online news sources might or might not be reliable. Some online and cable news is presented as news when it may be unreliable entertainment. Ask yourself the following questions to begin probing the reliability of the information:

1. Can I find additional support for the news source’s claim?
2. Are other reliable sources writing about the same topic and presenting similar claims?

Analyzing a Text for Bias

What is Bias?

Bias is a tendency, inclination, or prejudice to lean toward or against something, or to agree or disagree with a perspective, opinion, idea, subject, or topic. If someone has a bias toward something, then they tend to agree with or support it and will be more likely to present that topic or idea in a positive light. If someone has a bias against something, then they tend to disagree with and not support it and will be more likely to present that topic or idea in a negative light. Another way of expressing this is by saying that someone or a source is biased toward X, or pro-X, and someone or a source is biased against X, or anti-X. A good example is that parents are usually biased toward their own children. They tend always to believe the best of them and advocate for their interests. It usually takes a lot of evidence to convince parents that their children have done something wrong.

All people can express bias or be biased, and, therefore, all sources can contain biased information, even if the author is unaware of it. For this reason, bias is often referred to as *implicit bias*; their bias might not be explicit, but implied by their actions, ideas, or words.

Bias is often associated with an inability to consider how one's own perspective or preferences influences their reasoning, opinions, or arguments. Bias, in other words, might cloud judgment and reasoning.

While this might sound like perspective, they are distinct. Simply put, someone's perspective is the physical or sociocultural point from which they view something. Someone's bias is when their perspective influences their judgment of something in a very positive or negative way.

Bias can be difficult to determine because we, as readers, have our own biases that we regard as truthful, correct, or right. When we see a topic presented in a way we already believe is true, or that we agree with, it can be hard to spot the bias because our reasoning is clouded by our own preferences. Language is key. For example, an author might reveal their bias by using inflammatory or derogatory language to label or describe the "other." However, sometimes authors might not use such language, and it might be more difficult to determine their bias.

Readers must understand the kind of bias a source has in order to determine whether the source is credible and can be used for scholarly purposes—especially when you tend to agree with how the topic is being presented. Academic readers understand that bias exists and take care to determine what the bias is and how strongly it appears to influence an author's reasoning or presentation of ideas before deciding if or how to use a source. Again, language is key: it often gives clues to an author's bias and should serve as warning signs to read the author's ideas, opinions, or argument with caution.

Where does bias come from? Why do people hold biases?

Our day-to-days, as well as our cultures, histories, stories, and backgrounds, help shape how we understand and view the world around us. These experiences and identities in turn influence how we interpret and view what is happening around us. The way we view the world informs our biases.

For a simple example, consider someone who loves a particular football team. Maybe they grew up with a family, or even neighborhood or city, that loves and supports the same team. This person will lean in favor of this team, no matter what; this person has a bias for this team. Even when confronted with details about another team—perhaps historical wins, season statistics, or star players—they might continue to love their own team and refuse to accept the fact that the opposing team is better in some aspects (if only for one season). Their love of their home team clouds their reasoning, and might prevent them from acknowledging positive attributes of another team. In other words, one’s biases can prevent them from acknowledging the merits of other perspectives and opinions. This bias might be either implicit (they are unaware of the reason behind their preference), or explicit (they are very much aware of why they have a preference).

Bias, of course, goes beyond the realm of sports. You might think of other preferences that might lead to biased opinions. These might include topics that probably range from less serious to more personal. Some examples include:

- music type or group
- food
- states or other regions of origin
- culture
- economic background (e.g., upper, middle, lower classes)
- race and ethnicity
- religion
- political leaning (e.g., liberal and conservative)

Determining Biases

When we evaluate the credibility of a source or reference, we need to be aware of the text’s possible biases. A source can still be credible, even if it is biased (expresses a strong opinion or stance toward or against a topic). Bias in a source is not necessarily wrong or bad. Biased sources can still contain some accurate information. They can also help researchers understand the various ways topics or issues can be viewed. Our role as responsible researchers is deciding when they are appropriate and useful, and when they compromise the source’s credibility. In addition to using the questions for gauging the credibility of a text above, consider the following questions when analyzing a text for bias:

1. Which organizations have funded or published this text? What are their financial, political or religious agendas?
2. How is the information in the text presented? Does this reflect any agendas on the part of the author?
3. What information is left out of this source? How do these omissions reflect the author’s or publisher’s agenda?

4. What is the tone of the text or source? Is the language consistently negative, positive, or neutral?
5. Does the author present false information? (The only way to know this is to claim-check against other sources on the same topic to see how the same information is presented.)

Considering All of the Above, Is This Text Still Credible? Why?

Remember, information that is intentionally misleading due to an underlying agenda should be discarded. The agenda might be commercial and profit-based (the source is designed to promote or sell something), moral, religious, or political, and the authors might or might not be aware of their agenda. But, some sources that are biased might offer a fresh or alternative perspective to research—as long as it is balanced by other credible sources, and you are transparent to your audience about the biases the source presents.

It is not our goal to stamp out bias altogether; it is our goal to be conscious of how bias is at play in any given source. We establish the author or creator's biases and determine whether or not those biases compromise the source's credibility by answering the questions above. From the answers we've gathered, we should do the following:

- discard sources that are not credible
- use multiple credible sources with a variety of perspectives that tell all sides of the story
- be transparent about the potential biases in each source

Determining if the Source Should be Used

You should use multiple references to explore your inquiry questions and include a range of opinions and perspectives in your research. Using this variety of credible, relevant sources allows you to dig deeper into your area of inquiry, and yield richer insights—something not possible by exploring only a few sources.

Once you have determined what the biases are through closely and carefully reading and analyzing the text, decide whether you can still use it. Use the following questions for guidance:

- What value does using this source bring to your overall piece? Why should you use it, knowing what the biases are?
- Does the biased text add a fresh, alternative perspective to your research?
- How can you be sure to address the source's bias while also pointing out its attributes and relevance to your inquiry?

If you find a source to be biased but still credible, discuss its bias clearly and openly with your audience.

Checking Your Own Biases

After you have assessed your sources for bias and established their credibility, consider the following questions about your research to ensure you are presenting information as fairly and accurately as possible:

- **Using Multiple Sources:** Are you using multiple, credible sources to address your inquiry questions? Does your project make use of all of the resources available?
- **Diligence:** Have you vetted and verified the credibility of each of your sources? Have you fact-checked all of your claims? Have you investigated the origins of each of your sources?
- **Diversity:** Do your sources represent a diverse range of opinions and perspectives?
- **Balance:** Is your research balanced? Does your project acknowledge contrasting claims from different sources? Do you present all of the sides of the story?
- **Transparency:** Do you cite and discuss each of your sources? Are you aware of who authored, produced, or funded your sources? Do you reveal the origins of any claims you made? Have you discussed and shared the different biases, perspectives, orientations, and opinions that have come up in your research?