



Evaluating Your Sources for Reliability and Credibility

SPI 3002.4.3 Evaluate the
reliability and credibility of
sources for use in research.



Weed out unreliable sources.

Here's how:

1. Check the publication date of your source. Often, the more recent your material, the better, especially if you are writing about a current subject with continuing research and development.
2. Find out about the author. What are his or her credentials, and is he or she an expert or authority on this particular subject? Can you look him or her up on the internet?

If you can't find the specific author, look up the publisher with the same questions in mind.



Weed out unreliable sources. Here's how: (continued)

3. Use your own judgment about the quality of information the source is likely to contain.
 - The Jerry Springer show?
 - The National Inquirer?
 - Your brother's research paper from the year before?



Ask yourself these questions about your source:

1. Does this source seem to seek the truth about this topic, or is he or she writing only about one side of the issue?

Writing only about one side of the issue is called "bias." If the source is biased toward one side or the other, it isn't seeking the truth and should not be considered reliable!

Ex. Animal Cops Houston: biased in favor of Animal Control.



Ask yourself these questions about your source: (continued)

2. Is the author attempting to make a reputation for him or herself?
 - If the author has a reputation at stake, he or she is much less likely to publish erroneous information and therefore could be considered reliable.
 - Authors with reputations at stake include: professors, experts, legitimate scholars or scientists, and anyone who might lose his or her job or chances for a job as a result of bad information.



Ask yourself these questions about your source: (continued)


3. Why was this published? Some possibilities are:

- Inform, give facts, give data?
- Explain, persuade?
- Sell, entice?
- Share?
- Disclose?
- Entertain?




Most of all...

...remember that you can't believe everything you read. Think critically about all your sources!



Think about these possible sources for a research paper on humans consuming cows' milk. Determine which are credible and which should be skipped.

- A pamphlet produced by *La Leche League*, an organization that promotes breast-feeding.
- An article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* about the pro's and con's of cow's milk.
- A documentary about a dairy farmer and his daily life.
- An interview with a pediatrician.

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- A pamphlet produced by *La Leche League*, an organization that promotes breast-feeding.
 - UNRELIABLE. Why? La Leche League is interested in convincing mothers of newborns to breastfeed their children instead of formula feeding them. The bias is evident.
 - An article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* about the pro's and con's of cow's milk.
 - RELIABLE. Why? Since the article claims to discuss the pro's and con's, it is probably trying to avoid bias.
 - A documentary about a dairy farmer and his daily life.
 - UNRELIABLE. Why? A dairy farmer has an obvious reason to feel biased toward the promotion of cow's milk for human consumption.
 - An interview with a pediatrician.
 - RELIABLE, probably. Why? A pediatrician should be interested in what is good for his patients' health, not the milk industry.



Sample EOC Test Question

Which would provide a student with the most reliable information about the life of Zapata?

- A. An interview with the director of *Viva Zapata!*
- B. Research notes used by the author of *Viva Zapata!*
- C. The biography *Emiliano Zapata and His Contemporaries*
- D. A historical novel titled *Zapata, My Friend, My Enemy*



Thinking About Websites

SPI 3002.4.4 Evaluate the validity of Web pages as sources of information.

“5 Bad Sources for Your Research Project,”
according to about.com:

blogs, personal websites, Wiki sites, movies,
and historical novels.



Improve Your Research By Remembering These Tips:

- Wikipedia can be changed by anyone who wants to change it. You know this and so does your reader. Your reader will NOT be impressed if you use Wikipedia as a source.
- Google is a SEARCH ENGINE, not a database. For accurate, reliable, credible, and professional articles on your topic, use a reliable database (SIRS or EBSCO, for example).



Use the same techniques for websites that you used for print sources

- Review the publication information.
- Check out the author's credentials and the importance of the author's reputation.
- Look for bias.




In addition,

Remember that the domain won't necessarily help you to determine if you should use the source.

For example, a “.com” isn't necessarily trying to sell you something.

A “.edu” isn't automatically credible—it may be a professor's site to which his or her students post, or it may be an undergrad's assignment.



Think about these possible sources for a research paper on humans consuming cows' milk. Determine which are credible and which should be skipped.

1. *www.fda.gov*
2. *[www.not**milk**.com/](http://www.notmilk.com/)*
3. *www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/002448.htm*
4. *YouTube video entitled: "Why Cow's Milk Is Unhealthy For You."*

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1. www.fda.gov -- RELIABLE

Why? Generally the government has a lot to lose by lying to the public.

2. [www.not**milk**.com/](http://www.notmilk.com/) -- UNRELIABLE

Why? The title of this site directly states its bias.

3. www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/002448.htm -- RELIABLE

Why? This website has nothing to gain and nothing to lose by stating the truth about human consumption of cows' milk.

4. *YouTube video entitled: "Why Cow's Milk Is Unhealthy For You."* – UNRELIABLE

Why? First, it's a YouTube video and anybody can make a YouTube video. Second, the title gives away its bias.



Sample EOC Test Question

Which website would be the best choice for information about how to make a quilt?

- A. www.homeremediesmadeeasy.org
- B. www.nationalcraftsincorporated.com
- C. www.copyrightsandpatents.gov
- D. www.learncraftsquickly.net