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Contributors: Dana Lynn Driscoll, Allen Brizee.

Summary:

Evaluating sources of information is an important step in any research activity. This section provides information on evaluating bibliographic citations, aspects of evaluation, reading evaluation, print vs. Internet sources, and evaluating internet sources.

Evaluating Sources: Overview

The world is full of information to be found--however, not all of it is valid, useful, or accurate. Evaluating sources of information that you are considering using in your writing is an important step in any research activity.

The quantity of information available is so staggering that we cannot know everything about a subject. For example, it's estimated that anyone attempting to research what's known about depression would have to read over 100,000 studies on the subject. And there's the problem of trying to decide which studies have produced reliable results.

Similarly, for information on other topics, not only is there a huge quantity available but a very uneven level of quality. You don't want to rely on the news in the headlines of sensational tabloids near supermarket checkout counters, and it's just as hard to know how much to accept of what's in all the books, magazines, pamphlets, newspapers, journals, brochures, web sites, and various media reports that are available. People want to convince you to buy their products, agree with their opinions, rely on their data, vote for their candidate, consider their perspective, or accept them as experts. In short, you have to sift and make decisions all the time, and you want to make responsible choices that you won't regret.

Evaluating sources is an important skill. It's been called an art as well as work--much of which is detective work. You have to decide where to look, what clues to search for, and what to accept. You may be overwhelmed with too much information or too little. The temptation is to accept whatever you find. But don't be tempted. Learning how to

evaluate effectively is a skill you need both for your course papers and your life.

When writing research papers, you will also be evaluating sources as you search for information. You will need to make decisions about what to search for, where to look, and once you've found material on your topic, if it is a valid or useful source for your writing.

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Evaluating Bibliographic Citations

When searching for information in library catalogues and online article databases such as *EbscoHost* or *Proquest Direct*, you will first find a bibliographic citation entry. A bibliographic citation provides relevant information about the author and publication as well as short summary of the text.

Before you read a source or spend time hunting for it, begin by looking at the following information in the citation to evaluate whether it's worth finding or reading.

Consider the author, the title of the work, the summary, where it is, and the timeliness of the entry. You may also want to look at the keywords to see what other categories the work falls into. Evaluate this information to see if it is relevant and valid for your research.

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Evaluation During Reading

After you have asked yourself some questions about the source and determined that it's

worth your time to find and read the source, you can evaluate the material in the source as you read through it.

- Read the preface--what does the author want to accomplish? Browse through the table of contents and the index. This will give you an overview of the source. Is your topic covered in enough depth to be helpful? If you don't find your topic discussed, try searching for some synonyms in the index.
- Check for a list of references or other citations that look as if they will lead you to related material that would be good sources.
- Determine the intended audience. Are you the intended audience? Consider the tone, style, level of information, and assumptions the author makes about the reader. Are they appropriate for your needs?
- Try to determine if the content of the source is fact, opinion, or propaganda. If you think the source is offering facts, are the sources for those facts clearly indicated?
- Do you think there's enough evidence offered? Is the coverage comprehensive? (As you learn more and more about your topic, you will notice that this gets easier as you become more of an expert.)
- Is the language objective or emotional?
- Are there broad generalizations that overstate or oversimplify the matter?
- Does the author use a good mix of primary and secondary sources for information?
- If the source is opinion, does the author offer sound reasons for adopting that stance? (Consider again those questions about the author. Is this person reputable?)
- Check for accuracy.
- How timely is the source? Is the source 20 years out of date? Some information becomes dated when new research is available, but other older sources of information can be quite sound 50 or 100 years later.
- Do some cross-checking. Can you find some of the same information given elsewhere?
- How credible is the author? If the document is anonymous, what do you know about the organization?
- Are there vague or sweeping generalizations that aren't backed up with evidence?
- Are arguments very one-sided with no acknowledgement of other viewpoints?

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Evaluating Print vs. Internet Sources

With the advent of the World Wide Web, we are seeing a massive influx of digital texts and sources. Understanding the difference between what you can find on the web and what you can find in more traditional print sources is key.

Some sources such as journal or newspaper articles can be found in both print and digital format. However, much of what is found on the Internet does not have a print equivalent, and hence, has low or no quality standards for publication. Understanding the difference between the types of resources available will help you evaluate what you find.

Publication Process

Print Sources: Traditional print sources go through an extensive publication process that includes editing and article review. The process has fact-checkers, multiple reviewers, and editors to ensure quality of publication.

Internet Sources: Anyone with a computer and access to the Internet can publish a website or electronic document. Most web documents do not have editors, fact-checkers, or other types of reviewers.

Authorship and Affiliations

Print Sources: Print sources clearly indicate who the author is, what organization(s) he or she is affiliated with, and when his or her work was published.

Internet Sources: Authorship and affiliations are difficult to determine on the Internet. Some sites may have author and sponsorship listed, but many do not.

Sources and Quotations

Print Sources: In most traditional publications, external sources of information and direct quotations are clearly marked and identified.

Internet Sources: Sources the author used or referred to in the text may not be clearly indicated in an Internet source.

Bias and Special Interests

Print Sources: While bias certainly exists in traditional publications, printing is more expensive and difficult to accomplish. Most major publishers are out to make a profit and will either not cater to special interest groups or will clearly indicate when they are catering to special interest groups.

Internet Sources: The purpose of the online text may be misleading. A website that appears to be factual may actually be persuasive and/or deceptive.

Author Qualifications

Print Sources: Qualifications of an author are almost always necessary for print sources. Only qualified authors are likely to have their manuscripts accepted for publication.

Internet Sources: Even if the author and purpose of a website can be determined, the qualifications of the author are not always given.

Publication Information

Print Sources: Publication information such as date of publication, publisher, author, and editor are always clearly listed in print publications.

Internet Sources: Dates of publication and timeliness of information are questionable on the internet. Dates listed on websites could be the date posted, date updated, or a date may not be listed at all.

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