INTRODUCTION AND CRITERIA

Evaluating a source can begin even before you have the source in hand. You can initially appraise a source by first examining the bibliographic citation. A bibliographic citation is a written description of a book, journal article, essay, or some other published material. Bibliographic citations characteristically have three main components: author, title, and publication information (i.e. date, place, vol. & issue). These components can help you determine the usefulness of this source for a paper. Abstracts, if included as part of an index, can also provide useful content description when deciding the usefulness of a source. There are many ways to evaluate a source. Use the following criteria:

- Authority
- Currency
- Coverage
- Objectivity
- Accuracy

INITIAL APPRAISAL

Author (Authority and Affiliation)

1. What are the author’s credentials - educational background, past writings, or experience - in this area? Is the author a layperson, news reporter, scholar? Is the book or article written on a topic in the author’s area of expertise? *Who’s Who in America, Biography Index*, or the biographical information located in the publication itself can be used to determine the author’s credentials. What is the source of information? Who is the publisher? In the case of Web pages, look at the root part of the URL (web address). Does the web page come from:
   - .edu - an educational site such as a college or university
   - .gov - a government page such as the State Department
   - .com - a commercial site such as Amazon.com
   - .mil - a military site such as the U.S. Navy
   - .org - an organization site such as the World Health Organization
   - /~username - if you see a slash and tilde plus a username, that usually indicates a private user purchasing or using space on a commercial or educational site
2. 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.
3. Is the author associated with an institution or organization? What are the basic values or goals of the institution, organization or publisher? In the case of magazines or books, do
you think that the intent is to sell as many copies as possible? Look to see if there are
advertisements in the magazine or popular recognitions in the book preface.

**Date of Publication (Currency)**

1. When was the source published? This date is often located on the face of the title page
   below the name of the publisher. If it is not there, look for the copyright date on the
   reverse of the title page. On Web pages, the date of the last revision is usually at the
   bottom of the page. If it is not there, how do you know if the information is current?
2. Is the source current or out-of-date for your topic? Topic areas of continuing and rapid
   development, 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.
   Remember that most information on the Web is NOT usually historical.

**Edition or Revision (Currency)**

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. For web
pages, it is important to note if the author has bothered to keep up with changes.
Constant upkeep may indicate a vested interest.

**Publisher (Authority and Objectivity)**

Note the publisher, in the case of a book or periodical. 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 a high regard for the information being published. Consider once again whether the
publisher’s objective is to dispense valuable information or to sell copies. Also consider
if the journal is refereed or not. In the case of web pages, look again to the site where the
information is published.

**Title of Journal**

Is this a scholarly or popular journal? This distinction is important because it indicates
different levels of complexity in conveying ideas. If you need help in determining the
type of journal, see [Study Guide #5 - Distinguishing Scholarly from Non-Scholarly
Periodicals](#). Or you may wish to check your journal title in the latest edition of
*Magazines for Libraries* (Ref. 011.34 K3m) for a brief evaluative description.

**Purpose (for Web pages mostly)**

Why is the information on the Web? Is it to entertain, persuade, educate, inform, explain,
to reproduce information in another format, or for profit?
CONTENT ANALYSIS

Having made an initial appraisal, you should now examine the body of the source. Read the Preface to determine the authors 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.

Intended Audience

What type of audience is the author addressing? Is the publication aimed at a specialized or general audience? Is this source too elementary, too technical, too advanced, or just right for your needs?

Objective Reasoning (Objectivity)

1. Is the information covered fact, opinion, or propaganda? It is not always easy to separate fact from opinion. Facts can usually be verified; opinions, though they may be based on factual information, evolve from the interpretation of facts. Skilled writers can make you think their interpretations are facts.
2. Does the information appear to be valid and well researched, or is it questionable and unsupported by evidence? Assumptions should be reasonable. Note errors or omissions. Can the information be verified? In the case of web pages, are there links to further sources of information, perhaps even those of a different point of view?
3. Is the author’s point of view objective and impartial? Is the language free of emotion-rousing words and bias?

Coverage (Coverage)

1. Does the work update other sources, substantiate other materials you have read, or add new information? Does it extensively or marginally cover your topic? You should explore enough sources to obtain a variety of viewpoints. For web pages, how does the information presented compare to information found in other sources, especially non-Internet sources?
2. 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 the abortion debate, the actual transcripts of Roe v. Wade would be primary material. Other primary sources would be the diary of the woman originally involved in the case. Scholars and news outlets use this primary material to help generate historical interpretations or gather facts about what happened. Books, encyclopedia articles, and magazine articles about the case or the whole abortion debate in the U.S. since would be considered secondary sources. 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 stilted and choppy? Is the author’s argument repetitive?

**Evaluative reviews (other points of view)**

1. Locate critical reviews of books in a reviewing source, such as *Book Review Index* or *Book Review Digest*. Is the review favorable? Is the book under review considered 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. For more information on how to find book reviews, see **STUDY GUIDE #8 - FINDING BOOK REVIEWS**.

2. Do the various reviewers agree on the value or attributes of the book or has it aroused controversy among the critics?

3. For Web sites, consider consulting one of the evaluation and reviewing sources on the Internet.
Criteria vs. Web

- Authority of Web Resources
  Often difficult to determine authorship
  If author’s name is listed, his/her qualifications frequently absent
  Publisher’s responsibility often not indicated

- Currency of Web Resources
  Dates not always included on Web pages
  If included, a date may have various meanings:
  - date the information was first written
  - date the information was placed on the Web
  - date the information was last revised

- Coverage of Web Resources
  Web coverage may differ from print coverage
  Often hard to determine extent of Web coverage

- Objectivity of Web Resources
  Goals/aims of persons or groups presenting materials is often not clearly stated
  Web often functions as a “virtual soapbox”

- Accuracy of Web Resources
  Almost anyone can publish on the Web
  Many Web resources not verified by editors and/or fact checkers

Evaluating Web Resources -
http://www3.widener.edu/Academics/Libraries/Wolfgram_Memorial_Library/Evaluate_Web_Pages/659/

Evaluating Quality on the Net -
http://www.hopetillman.com/findqual.html

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly -
http://lib.nmsu.edu/instruction/eval.html

Cornell Study Guide on Critically Analyzing Information Sources
http://www.library.cornell.edu/t/help/res_strategy/evaluating/analyze.html