Evaluating Information
Jefferson Community College Library

When evaluating information, be it via the library databases or on the Internet or anywhere else, you need to determine if the information both meets your needs in terms of the content and if it is also reliable and authoritative enough for the intended use of the information.

A few examples of intended uses include: Brief composition pieces, term papers, or learning about topics to increase your own knowledge.

The following criteria should be considered as you think critically about the value and usefulness of information that you encounter as you proceed with your research:

**Authority**

- Who provided the information? Is the name of the source of the information provided?
- If so, are credentials provided?
- Is the source considered an expert in the field?
- If the information is published, has it been published by a reputable organization or publisher?
- Is the work self-published? (Via a blog or by a "vanity press" - one that will publish anything for a fee.)

  *While self-publication does not automatically mean the work is not authoritative, it is essential that the researcher be able to identify the author and have enough information about the author to establish their authority.*

**Here are a few generalizations relating to this criteria:**

*(Keeping in mind that for this and other criteria there are always exceptions)*

- University presses publish high quality materials.
- Professional organizations and associations are generally considered authoritative publishers of information relating to their professions.
- Major newspapers and news sites on the Internet (CNN, NPR, NBC, etc.) are usually considered authoritative in relation to the what, when, where, aspects of news stories. There can be *bias* in relation to the *why* or explaining the implications or causes of events, etc.
- Information found on .gov websites is usually considered authoritative.

See the **Scope** criteria for some related information on authorship authority for different types of publications.

See the **Objectivity** criteria for information on bias.

**Accuracy**

Closely related to authority, you also need to consider how accurate the information is and how well it is presented and documented.

- If you have any knowledge of the subject, does the content seem accurate? If you do not have knowledge of the content, look at different sources and compare the content.
• Are sources cited in a bibliography?
• Are there obvious spelling or grammar errors?
• Does the information correspond with what you have learned from other sources?
• Are sources primary or secondary?

Objectivity

• If the page relates to a controversial topic, are both sides of the argument represented evenly?
• Many biased pages will feature strongly worded statements, providing "facts" which may or may not be supported by evidence and documentation – if sources are documented often it is useful to locate the documented sources and draw your own conclusions about the issue.
• What is the purpose of the site?

Here are a few generalizations relating to this criteria:

(Keeping in mind that for this and other criteria there are always exceptions)

• Discerning bias and taking it into account is one of the most important aspects of thinking critically about sources of information.
• Locating sources with bias does not mean that you should not use them in your research, but you do need to understand that different groups of people will have different views on topics and often these views will often cause groups or authors to present information in ways that support their own viewpoints.
• Ideally you should try to locate sources from multiple points of view on controversial topics and after weighing the arguments and looking at cited evidence yourself you will form your own conclusions about the topic.

Currency

• When was the information actually written?
• When was it last updated?
• If the source is an Internet page, how current are the links?

Scope

• Is the coverage in-depth or superficial? A topic overview or an in-depth investigation into one aspect of a larger topic?
• Who is the intended audience? Subject experts with advanced college degrees or elementary school children? Be sure to use an appropriate source.

Here are a few generalizations relating to this criteria:

(Keeping in mind that for this and other criteria there are always exceptions)

• Newspapers, some magazines, Internet news sources, etc. are generally written for the general public. With a 10th grade reading level or so, most people can read and understand the content.
• With the above "general readership" sources, one week a reporter is writing about one topic and the next week he or she will be writing about something else. In that sense, the authorship as well as the readership is general.
• For scholarly journal sources, the authorship is very much subject specific - the author(s) will have advanced degrees relating to the topic as will the editors of the journal. Many of the readers of the articles will have degrees relating to the topic as well.