**Evaluating Sources**

1. Find the sources for your information.

Most research will be done using online resources like electronic databases and Internet search engines. Be sure you understand how to find what you need.

1. Be aware of some basic search terms:
   1. Abstract: a summary of the content of an academic article, usually found at the beginning of the article; this can help you quickly decide if a source is relevant to you
   2. Catalog: a database that shows what a library owns and where the resources are located (in a physical space); electronic catalogs are searchable by keyword, author, title, or topic
   3. Citation: this is the reference to a source that gives the reader enough information to find a source themselves
   4. Keyword: a word used to search databases; these are very specific
   5. Search engine: a program that gives you the ability to search the Internet for information
   6. Wildcard: a symbol that can be used as a substitute for letters in a keyword search to help expand it; for example, an asterisk (\*) at the end of the word“math” could be used to find items containing the words “mathematics” or “mathematical”
2. When you locate potential sources, the first thing you need to look for is relevance for your needs. If it isnot something you need, donot waste time with it. To see if your potential source is relevant, ask yourself if it answers one of the key questions you will need to know about your topic: Who? What? When? Where? How? or Why?

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Why do you need sources in your research? The answer is easy—you use them to provide information, support your ideas, and help you draw your own conclusions. If sources of information are this important, then you need to make sure you are using things that are accurate and scholarly. Deciding between sources that are acceptable and unacceptable is one of the most challenging things you can do, but it can make all the difference in writing a well-supported assignment.

The Internet has made information more readily available for all of us, but it has also allowed a great deal of false or misleading information to be posted for public view. Most of what you find on Internet searches is self-published, so it doesnot go through the same processes of peerreview and revision as a book or journal article might.

There are some criteria that you can use to help you evaluate sources as you search for information:

* **Credible:** When deciding this, you need to ask questions about who wrote the source. Is the individual an authority in the field? Do they have the education or training that shows they know what they are talking about? Joe Smith’s blog about the American Revolution might not be a good source, especially if Joe Smith doesnot provide any indication of this expertise on the website—no matter how attractive the website might be. Discernment is key.
* **Scholarly:** What do people mean when they say a source is scholarly? And what is “peer-reviewed”? These are some words you might see in the instructions for your coursework that you will be expected to understand. It is easy to determine if a book or article is scholarly, which will mean that it has been peer-reviewed, but it does take a bit of work on your part. Scholarly sources are those that have been reviewed by other experts in the field and have undergone an extensive revision process to ensure that the information published is well researched and supported by strong evidence. This is the process of “peerreview” that articles go through before being published. Books are handled in much the same way. So, how can you tell if a book or an article is scholarly? Here are some tips:
* If the source is written in a professional tone and includes references, either in the form of footnotes or endnotes, it is likely a scholarly source.
* If you are looking at an article, check to see where the article was published and do a quick search to find out if the journal is “peer-reviewed.” Professional journals, such as the *Journal of Forensic Research*, are peer-reviewed, but magazines, such as *Civil War Times*, and websites like Wikipedia are not.
* Scholarly articles will always list the author and will usually include some background on the individual as well.
* Although some sources that are not scholarly or peer-reviewed may be good places to collect basic information, it is necessary to look at them closely and try to find additional supporting evidence for anything they contain in another place. Again, the world contains a great deal of information that looks good but is not wellsupported or accurate.
* **Current:**In academic circles, researchers generally build their work on what others have done in the past. Scholars use the work of others to build their evidence, adding another layer of research to it to bring new information and conclusions to light. In some cases, such as history, using an original, or primary, source is perfectly acceptable as you build your own research, while in other cases, such as science, it is best to use the latest information available. If you arenot sure of what information to use, ASK! Your instructor can tell you what is required for your work.

We have one more aspect of evaluating sources to cover, but it is something we need to give a bit more time and attention.

**Assessing Bias**

Most scholars seek to publish their work in an unbiased way, or at least that should be the goal. Some only superficially review their work as they present their research to the world, while others put considerable thought into how their own perceptions and perspectives have shaped what they publish. Even though people have the best of intentions with regard to bias, we are all human and approach information and life from different points of view that color how we see the world.

When you start researching any topic, you will find that there are some people who are not shy about their lack of objectivity while others will cloud their personal points of view with slight shifts in the way evidence is presented or by leaving something out altogether. This is a problem you can see, not only in the academic world, but in the wider scope of politics, economics, law, and civic participation. Look on the Internet at any controversial topic, and you can see that there are people who publish work with clear conflicts of interest that create a bias in a particular direction. Learning to assess any source for bias is something that will benefit you as you progress through life.

Here are some things you should look for when assessing any source, including books, articles, websites, news stories, and personal opinions posted on social media:

* Does the author have connections to any political, religious, or special interest groups that could change the way in which he or she conducts research or draws conclusions?
* Does the article show evidence that different perspectives or alternative evidence was considered? Does it discuss alternate points of view with the same tone or focus and use of evidence?
* Is the article written as an objective appeal to reason or as a subjective appeal to emotion?

Even if an article is not written in a completely objective way, you can still use any good information it contains in your paper and cite it. Be sure you use your critical thinking skills to avoid making the same conclusions and note the issues in your paper.