

What Makes a “Good” Source

Whenever you are looking for a “good” source, how can you recognize it when you see it? Here is a “checklist” to help you determine if what you have in hand is worth the time and effort to read and use. (By the way, this checklist works with Internet web sites, articles and books -- whatever you find that contains “information.”)

Who wrote it? (Authority)

Who is **responsible** for the content of the source? Can you determine the name of the individual, the organization, or entity which produced it? Is there an address or e-mail given to provide communication or feedback? If NOT, then find a better source. You can't trust a source when the authorship is hidden.

Why was it written? (Objectivity)

Purpose of a source is very important to understand its **bias**. Every creator has a purpose or viewpoint behind what he/she makes. The written word is so potent that we need to identify the reasons behind it. Print sources often state or imply the purpose or intent of the text in the introduction or preface. The purpose of an internet source is sometimes harder to pinpoint. Look at the address for clues, and read the material carefully for language which gives opinion, viewpoint, or perspective. This bias helps us determine how to interpret the information for our own use.

When was it written? (Currency)

Timeliness is often an important factor in the usefulness of information. Look for copyright dates, updates, and sources used. If the source contains references to other pieces of information, can you discover when those were produced? That will give you a clue as to when your material was written or at least the information on which it was based. You need to look for CURRENT (within the last 3 or 4 years) information. For some topics you will need information even more current than that. This is when databases of periodicals become valuable. Sometimes the documents in databases are posted before the item is actually on the newsstands or in the mail!

Where has the information been published previously? (Accuracy)

The more **reliable** a source the more likely it is that the information contained in it was checked and verified. If the information was published without such checks, you cannot tell if the information is true or not. (That's how rumors get started!) Look for clues that tell you that the information was verified in other sources or can be found duplicated in at least two other independent sources. If dates, updates, and sources are presented, these are clues which indicate the author at least attempts to keep the information current. But be cautious. Try to find additional sources that confirm the information.

How is the information organized and presented? (Content & Organization)

Does this source give you the information you need in an **organized**, well presented manner? Does it flow logically from one point to another? Is it pleasing to the eye and easy to follow? How **in depth** does the source get on the topic? If what you get is superficial or gives only minimal data – one or two sentences or paragraphs – then the source doesn't really give you much content. Just a mention of your topic is NOT enough! You should find details and explanations provided which offer substantial information. Guard against those web sites which only give you links to other sites. You can find yourself in a big loop of pages and no real information.