

Evaluating Online Sources

➤ You Already Know How

The criteria you use to evaluate online sources are the same criteria that the readers of your English 112 papers use to evaluate the effectiveness of your writing. This means that the criteria that make your Eng112 paper effective are the same criteria that make a source credible. Such criteria include the following: a clear thesis statement or focus with strong supporting arguments; concise, clear writing that is free of grammatical errors; logically organized writing; counterarguments that seriously address the opposition's arguments; appropriate tone; relatively unbiased writing; and proper citation of reputable sources. So use what you are learning in English 112 to evaluate not only online sources, but all sources!

➤ First Things First: Quick Overview of the Site

Professionalism and Quality

When you first enter a site, determine if the site has a professional feel about it. A site that lacks professionalism and quality may also lack credibility.

- **Author.** Do you know who authored or sponsored the site? Is there a link to a homepage of the person or organization responsible for the site? If the source of the information is unknown, be wary. Why would a reputable author fail to include his/her name? In some cases, an unknown source may be credible, but be sure.
- **Writing.** Is the text poorly written? Are there numerous grammar and/or spelling errors? If your answer is yes to both or either of these questions, this site may lack credibility. If an author doesn't take the time to check his spelling, can you trust that he thoroughly checked the accuracy of his facts?
- **Motives.** What appear to be the motives of the site? Is the author trying to entertain, sell, inform, persuade or broadcast personal opinions? Why is the author posting the information on the web? Consider the following:
 - ✓ Sites that advocate an idea or opinion, sell (many .com sites) or express personal opinions (John's homepage) tend to be biased.
 - ✓ .edu, .gov, and .org tend to be more informational (less biased).
- **Current Info.** Are the references that the author used "cutting-edge"? When was the last time the site was updated? A site that has out-of-date information may not be the best source to use in your research paper.
- **Organization.** How well is the site organized? Logically organized websites are usually of higher quality.
- **Graphics/Color Scheme.** Are the colors bold and overbearing? Do numerous animated objects overwhelm the page? Is the layout confusing? If the appearance of the site doesn't strike you as professional, then question whether this is a source you should use.

➤ Now Let's Dig a Little Deeper: Evaluating the Author and Evidence

THE AUTHOR

1. The Author's Credibility: Some Have More than Others

Is this author credible? How can I determine his/her credibility? The following **MAY** indicate that you have found a credible author:

- **Reputation.** You have run across this author's name before in readings and research and/or your instructor has recommended the author.

- **Credentials.** The author has extensive expertise in the area in which she/he is writing or the author has extensive experience related to the topic.
- **Affiliation with Organization.** The author has been sponsored by or screened by an organization that is well known in the relevant field of study.
- **Biases.** The author is relatively free of bias. No author can be completely unbiased, but be wary of authors who may have something to gain (i.e. money) by taking a particular stance on a subject and authors who are overly opinionated without support for their arguments.
- **Fairness.** The author has addressed counterarguments and possible objections the opposition may have regarding the topic in a reasonable and serious fashion rather than simply telling one side of the story.

2. The Author's Intended Meaning: Does she mean what I mean?

What is in a word? A lot. In fact, most words have various meanings, which is important to remember when evaluating online sources. Let's look at some examples:

- **"Crime on the Internet."** By Internet, does the author mean the World Wide Web? Is he also referring to electronic mail? Also, what kind of crime is the author referring to? Cyber-rape? Copyright violations?
- **Death Penalty:** Let's say you argue that the death penalty, by lethal injection only, is humane. You find a source that states, "twenty-two executions encountered problems during the execution process." Now, you need to determine what this author means by execution. Is he referring to lethal injections or is he referring to the electric chair? Maybe he is referring to both or even some other style of execution? Also what does he mean by problems? Are these problems relevant to the assertion that lethal injection is humane? If you use the source without determining the author's intended meaning, you could weaken your own argument.

3. The Author's Value Assumptions: The hidden meaning

Often, within an author's arguments are hidden assumptions that you should be aware of. Let's start with some definitions and examples:

- **Assumption** is something taken for granted or accepted as true without proof.
 - ✓ *Example:* Thesis: The grading system should not be used in college classes
Reason: The grading system is an obstacle to cooperation.
Assumption: Cooperation is important in college.
- **Value**, essentially, "is an idea that people view as worthwhile" (Browne 46)
 - ✓ *Example:* Here are some commonly-held values—
Cooperation, autonomy, justice, honesty, patriotism, courage, adventure, peace, harmony, equality of opportunity, freedom
- **Value Assumptions**, then, "are the values that writers implicitly prefer over other values in certain contexts" (Browne 47).
- **Why do I need to be aware of value assumptions?** When arguing a position, the author is favoring one value over another usually without making this apparent to the reader. When reading an argument, ask yourself what values the author is upholding and what values he/she is ignoring. This is a form of bias that is usually implied rather than stated outright. As with bias, it is important to understand what the author's assumptions are in order to know whether or not this source will be a positive addition to your research paper.

THE EVIDENCE

1. Locate the Thesis and Support. Before you can evaluate the evidence, you first must find and understand the author's thesis, a conclusion the author has drawn based on feelings, experiences, research, etc., and the reasons why the author has drawn such a conclusion. It is also important, then, to identify the evidence she uses to support the reasons and, overall, her thesis. Just as you must support your thesis with solid evidence to be considered credible, so must every author.

2. Evaluating the Evidence. If you research the TWA Flight 800, which was headed for Paris but exploded shortly after taking off, you will find conflicting claims (an opinion or insight asserted as the truth—like a thesis) regarding the cause of the crash. How do you decide which claims are most believable? To answer this, you need to determine how good the evidence is. Credible Internet sites expect the reader to only accept their claim if they have provided convincing evidence. Thus, when reviewing an Internet site for quality of evidence, ask "Where is the evidence? How do I know that this evidence is reliable?" Let's look at the various types of evidence you are likely to encounter:

- **Personal Testimonials/Personal Experience as Evidence**

Good or Bad? Do some investigating before using personal experience as evidence. Determine the author's expertise, values and biases. Also remember that personal experience is not usually the strongest form of evidence. One person's experience is not enough to prove that this is typical in most cases.

Consider the following:

- ✓ **Selectivity.** People have selective memories and, therefore, can only share their perspective, which is likely to be different for each person who witnesses the same event. In addition, if a person is trying to persuade a reader, he may only share that part of the testimony that will help him to promote his cause.
- ✓ **Personal Interest.** Someone may be giving a testimonial for the sole purpose of gaining something in return. For example, one movie producer may speak highly of another producer, hoping the favor to be returned.
- ✓ **Differing Perspectives.** Testimonials usually reflect the values and standards of that one person. For example, if a coworker raves about the new boss, you should question what it is about this boss your coworker values. It is likely that you have different standards by which you determine the quality of a boss.

- **Research Studies**

Good or bad? When the research is conducted well, research studies are one of the highest quality sources of evidence. The reason being that "such studies involve a systematic collection of observations by people trained to do scientific research" (Browne 56). But you still need to ask, "How dependable are the findings?" Consider the following:

- ✓ **Bias.** Even researchers have expectations, values and needs that can bias what they research, how they research and the results. They may even be pressured to draw particular conclusions. Imagine the dilemma a researcher may be in if his findings show that the new drug that a drug company wants to put on the market is ineffective and this very same company is funding his research.
- ✓ **Distortion.** Web authors who post research studies may distort the actual findings by posting only part of the study or including results out of context.

- ✓ **Facts Change.** Facts can change over time with new research, so try to locate recent research.
- ✓ **Source.** What is the quality of the source of the report? Usually the most reliable reports are those published in peer-review journals, in which a study is not accepted unless relevant experts have reviewed it.
(**Note:** visit the Jerome library for help locating peer-reviewed journals)

- **Biased Surveys and Questionnaires**

Good or bad? According to Browne, "Surveys and questionnaires are usually used to measure people's attitudes and beliefs. Responses to them are subject to many influences, so you must be very cautious in interpreting their meaning" (58). It is helpful to remember that the better the quality of the survey, the more reliable the findings. Let's consider some factors:

- ✓ **Honesty.** In order for a survey to be useful, those surveyed must be truthful so that what they say actually reflects what they truly believe and feel. But this may not always be the case. For example, how many people will truthfully answer questions, such as "Are you prejudiced?"
- ✓ **Ambiguous Wording.** If the phrasing on a survey is not clear, then those responding to the survey may have very different interpretations, which could skew the results. Imagine the various interpretations that might come from the question, "Are you happily married?"
- ✓ **Bias.** A researcher may intentionally or unintentionally build bias into the question perhaps because he/she is hoping for particular results. For example, the results of a questionnaire sent by a US Congressman indicated that 92% were against government-supported child-care centers. These results should give you reason to pause. Why would these people be against affordable childcare? Consider the question on the questionnaire: "Do you believe the federal government should provide child-care centers to assist parents in rearing their children?" The bias here is evident in the part that reads "assist parents in rearing their children." What if the researcher had simply asked, "Do you believe the federal government should provide child-care centers to assist parents while they are at work and have no alternatives?" The results would likely have been different.
- ✓ **Those Surveyed.** Determine who the researcher surveyed. If he surveyed people who subscribe to a liberal magazine, realize that the results of the survey cannot be generalized to the overall public.

➤ **Additional Resources**

- Librarian's Index to the Internet:
- *College and Research Libraries News*: Look for their ongoing series of articles called "Internet Resources."
- Using Internet and Web Search Engines Effectively: An Online Course from the American Library Association: <http://www.ala.org/ICONN/advancedcourses.html>
- The BGSU's Library offers help with Internet sources. Go to the library home page: <http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/library/> and scroll to the bottom right hand corner. There you will find a picture of the earth with the word "Internet" running through the middle. Click on this icon to find reliable Internet sources.
- Also, check out handouts #7 and #8 put out by the BGSU library: <http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/library/infosrv/lue/E112/ENG112.html>