

Guidelines for Evaluating (Online) Sources

Assessing sources is ALL about ETHOS, determining the credibility of the author, the place of publication, and the evidence given. This is often problematized by the WWW. Because anyone can "publish" anything, evaluation of sources becomes even more crucial. When searching in the library for books and articles, the assumption is that the library only houses authoritative sources from accepted publishers and authors. The role of publishers is to evaluate the authors and evidence for you. With the Web, assessment rests primarily on your shoulders. Here are some tips/strategies:

. Is the source authoritative? Was it written by an expert or a person whom you can expect to write credibly on the subject? (You generally want a physicist writing about physics, not a photographer). If you do not know who the authors are, put their names into a search engine and find out. You might find their homepages, or if they are famous theorists in their field/s you might find sites dedicated to them. Or, you might find other articles that argue against them. Skim the article to find out. If you find nothing on them, there is a good chance that they may not be all that authoritative. ETHOS can be relative: a fan site may not be authoritative if you need a discussion of authorial intent to support your argument, but a fan site may be just what you want if your argument is about audience responses to a TV show or band. Think about your argument and whether or not the author of the web site you are looking at is appropriate.

. Is the source reliable? Does the material appear in a reputable publication—in a book published by an established publisher or in a respected journal or magazine? If the source is in an academic journal, on an academic website (.edu), in an academic database, in a library database, on a book publisher's site, or in an online newspaper (NY Times), or magazine (Time), or news site (CNN) that you recognize, then it is likely to be reliable. If it is in a personal site/server (flashnet, mindspring, onramp, aol, etc.), or on a commercial server (.com, hosted by a company), or a freebie server (Geocities, etc.), then it is probably questionable. Some academics put material up in their homepages that is reliable material even though it is not in a journal, depending on the ethos of the academic, but it's better if it is in a journal. The main thing you want to do is figure out the main site that a page is in. If there is no "home" or back button on the page, or no logos that tell you the main site you are in, then delete the page title in the URL (web address) and hit enter. For example: <<http://www.uta.edu/english/hawk/syllabi>>. You know this is an academic site but you are not sure what kind. Delete syllabi <<http://www.uta.edu/english/hawk/>> and hit enter. Then you find out it is a personal homepage.

. Is the source well known? Is the source cited elsewhere as you read about the subject? If so, the authority of the source is probably widely accepted. To know this you have to have done proper research and looked in reputable sources. But if the same names keep popping up, it is a good sign. On the web, this can also be determined by looking for links pages or bibliographies related to the author or subject, or by doing a web search based on the title of the work or author. If the name or title continues to pop up and on credible sites, then the source is probably widely known.

. Is the information well supported? Is the source based on primary evidence? If it is based on secondary evidence, is it authoritative and reliable? In other words, is the source citing Marx

(primary evidence), or somebody talking about Marx (secondary evidence)? And if it is someone talking about Marx, is that person reliable/reputable? Is the account a first hand account (primary) or a retelling of someone else's account (secondary)? Or is it research the author conducted, or is it relying on someone else's study? And again, is the person or group who conducted that study reputable. Arguments are ALL about credibility of both the author and the material that the author cites. Use the above search strategies to determine the credibility of the cited material as well as the author.

. Is the tone well balanced? Is the language even in tone (low on the PATHOS scale) and therefore more likely reliable, or is it slanted and emotional (high in PATHOS) and therefore probably less reliable? Always try to determine what the author's assumptions/biases are. If the author is a Marxist, is s/he railing against capitalism or trying to present a reasonable argument based on data? If the author is a Republican, is s/he ranting about Clinton and saying "no new taxes" or spelling out the logistics of his/her proposed tax plan? Material on the web is often low on the LOGOS scale, unless the material is by sanctioned authors and publishers/web sites. Be critical, and look for reasonable arguments.

. Is the source current? Is the material current, and therefore more likely reliable, or has later authoritative and reliable research made it outdated? "Old" is not necessarily outdated. In many fields, classic works of research remain authoritative for decades or even centuries. If the topic is technology or pop culture, an article or source may be "old" after six months. Again, be sure to look at the argument you are trying to support and the authors and data you are using to support it. Dates are sometimes tougher to determine on the web as opposed to print. If the article is in an academic journal or magazine, it will probably have a date. If the article is on a web site, it may have a "last updated" reference at the bottom or in a corner, which may or may not be the actual date it was last updated (people often forget to update the update). Other web texts may have no date at all. Try going back to the main home site/folder and look for dates there, and of course look for clues in the text itself—skim the text and look for the most current date referenced or look at the works cited and skim it for the source with the latest date. Again, you can do a web search to see if the author has written on the subject since the source you are looking at (often authors will have resumes or vitas online that list their publications). Otherwise, more content specific research will be needed to determine if the idea or argument has been made passé.