

# Evaluating Print & Online Sources

## Evaluating a Book:

- Read the dust jacket or cover copy for insights into the book's coverage and currency as well as the author's expertise.
- Scan the table of contents and identify any promising chapters
- Read the author's preface, looking for his or her thesis or purpose
- Check the index for key words or key phrases related to your research topic
- Read the opening and concluding paragraphs of any promising chapter; if you are unsure about its usefulness, skim the whole chapter
- Does the author have a discernable bias?

## Evaluating an Article:

- What do you know about the journal or magazine publishing the article? Scholarly journals (*American Economic Review, Journal of Marriage and the Family, The Wilson Quarterly*) publish articles about original research written by authorities in the field. Research essays always cite their sources in footnotes or bibliographies. Popular news and general interest magazines (*National Geographic, Smithsonian, Time, Ebony*), on the other hand, publish informative, entertaining, and easy-to-read articles written by editorial staff or freelance writers. Popular essays sometimes cite sources but often do not.
- What is the reputation of the journal or magazine? Determine the publisher or sponsor. Is it an academic institution or a commercial enterprise or individual? Does the publisher or publication have a reputation for accuracy and objectivity?
- Who are the readers of this journal or magazine?
- What are the author's credentials?
- Consider the title or headline of the article as well as the opening paragraph or two and the conclusion. Does the source appear to be too general or too technical for your needs and audience?
- For articles in journals, read the abstract (a summary of the main points) if there is one. Examine any photographs, charts, graphs, or other illustrations that accompany the article. Determine how useful they might be for your research purposes.

## Evaluating a Web Site:

- Consider the type of Web site. Is this site a personal blog or a professional publication? Often the URL, especially the top-level domain name, can give you a clue about the kinds of information provided and the type of organization behind the site. Common suffixes include:

.com – business/commercial/personal

.edu – educational institution

.gov – government sponsored

.net – various types of networks

.org – non-profit organization, but also some commercial/personal

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- Be advised that *.org* is not regulated like *.edu* and *.gov*, for example. Most nonprofits use *.org*, but many commercial and personal sites do as well.
- Examine the home page of the site. Does the content appear to be related to your research topic?
- Is there an *About* link on the home page that takes you to background information on the site's sponsor? Is there a mission statement, history, or statement of philosophy? Can you verify whether the site is official – actually sanctioned by the organization or company?
- Identify the author of the site. What are the author's qualifications for writing on this subject?
- Is there a print equivalent available? Is the Web version more or less extensive than the print version?
- When was the site last updated? Is the content current enough for your purposes?

### Checklist for Analyzing Print and Online Sources

- What is the writer's thesis or claim?
- How does the writer support this thesis? Does evidence seem reasonable and ample, or is it mainly anecdotal?
- Does the writer consider opposing viewpoints?
- Does the writer have any obvious political or religious biases? Is the writer associated with any special-interest groups such as Planned Parenthood, Greenpeace, Amnesty International, or the National Rifle Association?
- Is the writer an expert on the subject? Do other writers mention this author in their work?
- Is important information documented through footnotes or links so that it can be verified or corroborated in other sources?
- What is the author's purpose – to inform or to argue for a particular position or action?
- Do the writer's thesis and purpose clearly relate to your research topic?
- Does the source reflect current thinking and research in the field?