Evaluating Sources

Evaluating sources can be difficult work. But if you want your audience to trust what you say, your sources need to be strong. Following these tips will help you show your readers they can rely on you to use the best, most trustworthy information.

First, why use outside sources?

Writers who use sources see at least five purposes for consulting them:

1. To use information that provides useful background or a **context** for understanding the research question.
2. To use information that **answers** a relevant question.
3. To use information as **evidence** to support a claim or idea, or in some cases, evidence that seems not to support an assertion but might if seen a certain way.
4. To use information from a **particular author** who is influential in the debate about a topic.
5. To use information to **complicate** a writer's thesis, raising interesting questions. (Ballenger, 2011, p. 486)

What kinds of sources do you need?

General sources, such as those retrieved in a Web search or from a general encyclopedia, usually address wide audiences and discuss subjects in general terms. **Specialized sources**, such as scholarly books and academic journals, usually address narrower audiences in specific fields and discuss subjects in greater detail. Specialized sources are also often peer reviewed for accuracy and reliability, among other things. For this reason, specialized sources are often sought for authoritative answers to research questions. General sources can also be useful but not for the same purposes. For example, if you're looking for information on the impact of long-distance running on the human body, consult the *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research*. To add a human element to your project, you could use a feature news story or an example quotation from an electronic forum you found on the Internet.

Primary sources are original documents or artifacts that constitute firsthand information. These can be diaries, speeches, letters, official records, works of art, or relics. Interviews that you conduct may also be considered primary sources. **Secondary sources** are publications or other works that interpret or analyze primary sources. These usually include journal articles, media commentary, book reviews, critical essays, or textbooks. Researchers use primary and secondary sources for different purposes. One would use a primary source as an object for study or to prove information that needs hard evidence to back it up. Perhaps for the same project, secondary sources might be used to provide other writers' perspectives, reveal disagreement among scholars, or further discuss a single perspective.

As you search for sources, evaluate each for its reliability and usefulness:

- What is my purpose for consulting the source? What information do I need?
- Who/what is the source (name, qualifications)? What do I know about this author, this publisher?
- What are the source's thesis and supporting points?
- Is this source the most authoritative for the information I seek? Why choose this source over others?
- What other sources support the content of this source? Are those sources trustworthy?
- What leanings or biases should my audience and I notice in the source?
- How does this source relate with other sources? Does it align with or contradict them?

Reference

Ballenger, B. (2011). *The Curious Writer* (3rd ed.). New York: Longman.