



Evaluating a source

Introduction

During your time at university, you will need to demonstrate good evaluation and analytical skills when writing assignments. Good evaluation will require you to do background reading so that you can back up your comments with evidence – **do not simply state what you think**. Key to critical evaluation is a fair and balanced review of a source. It is therefore important that you do not solely focus on negative aspects of your source and acknowledge positive aspects of the work as well.

Areas to consider when evaluating a source

The nature of your assignment will influence how you evaluate the usefulness of a source. However, there are some basic areas that you would typically consider:

When was the source published?

It is important to consider how long ago a source was published. Overtime the credibility of theories, concepts, and models will change therefore what was highly influential several years ago may now be out of date. If you are critically examining an older source, you might want to examine more recent research to see how well findings have stood the test of time.

Who wrote the source?

Before reading the source, it is important to think critically about who the author is.

Ask yourself:

- Is the author a subject matter expert? If not, are they qualified to discuss the area they are reporting?
- Does the source contain details of the author's credentials / qualifications?

Who wrote the source will be a particularly important area to address if you are critiquing a review article. This is because the content of a review article will typically be based on an individual's own experiences or perceptions and so is not based on a presentation of experimental findings. It is therefore essential that you research the author so that you can ascertain how well they know their subject area (are they a world authority?). If you find an author is not an expert then one might question the accuracy / quality of what they discuss.

Where was the source published?

Where a source is published can tell you a lot about its quality. Question:

- Is the source published in a well-established peer reviewed journal? If so, a panel of subject matter experts will have reviewed the article, which should ensure high quality.
- If the source is not published in a peer reviewed journal, how good is its publication location? Resources such as Wikipedia may be a useful first source for information but do not constitute high quality publications.

How relevant is the source?

You should only use sources that are directly related to your assignment question. Including sources that are not related to the topic could cause your tutor to question how well you have understood the assignment.

Who benefits?

Organisations that pay for sources to be written may have an agenda behind what information is presented. This could influence the quality and accuracy.

For example, imagine a report had been published that questions the safety of a vaccination. However, it later materialises that the author had been paid to conduct the research by a group that was in favour of banning vaccinations (but had not acknowledged this at the time of publication). Potentially, this may mean that the author had an unspoken agenda whilst writing their report that could have distorted how they presented information.

Further information

The Learning Resources Study Hub provides a range of opportunities (such as workshops and drop-ins) for you to enhance your academic skills. For more information visit:

lrweb.beds.ac.uk/studyhub

