

Evaluating Sources.

It is important that we carefully consider the sources that we use within our work, to ensure that our points are supported with well-reasoned arguments and conclusions. Remember, just because a source is published (peer reviewed or otherwise), does not entail that their findings and conclusions fairly represent your subject area. Similarly, we need to check that the sources we use in our argument are relevant, reliable, valid and useful (see figure one).

Is the source relevant?

- How is the information or content **relevant** to your paper or topic? This can be broadly relevant, or related to a specific idea or concept. Think about how it relates to your research question.
- Is the **purpose** of the writing to sell an idea, product or agenda (e.g. with some newspapers)?

Is the author reliable?

- Is the author credible or **trustworthy**? Remember, a personal narrative writing in first person (as with some qualitative based research), can still be 'neutral', objective in its analysis, and therefore reliable.
- May the author have any **biases**? We may need to use sources that hold firm opinions as part of our assignment (e.g. newspapers), and so it is important to take these opinions or biases into consideration.
- Is the author considering **other points of view or perspectives**? (especially points or evidence that don't agree with their arguments) If not, this is a sign they may not be objective.
- Is the author a **recognised** scholar in this area? Many authors may not be recognised scholars (e.g. early career researchers) or their research may be a 'new' area of research; this does not necessarily entail their work is 'unreliable', just that we should treat their conclusions tentatively and look for similar findings.
- Is the source **user generated** (e.g. wikis or forums) or **self-published** (e.g. blogs, personal websites or social media)? If so, are they credible, supporting (and referencing) their points? If entirely user-generated or self-published, there is no quality check on the source.

Is the information valid?

- Is the research **funded** (e.g. some biomedical trials are funded by drug companies)? Would getting this money make the author biased as a result?
- Does the author **consistently** support their claims? Lack of evidence supporting an argument may suggest opinion, rather than concrete findings, and should be treated tentatively.
- How is the author using primary and secondary **evidence** to support their argument? Sources based entirely on secondary evidence (i.e. from the literature or their reading) can be valid but question their choice of readings.

Learning Development

- How has the evidence been **collected**? This relates to methodology for primary data and to the choice of literature for secondary data.
- Is there an **intended audience** for the writing, and does it impact how it is written?
- Is the writing designed to incite a **reaction** (i.e. using inflammatory speech)?
- Is the journal in which the research is published intending to **promote a particular point of view** (e.g. a neurology research based journal will look to promote neurological based arguments)? And is it important to consider alternative viewpoints (i.e. in other journals) in **your** argument?

Is the source useful for one of the following?

- Developing your **understanding** of the subject (i.e. for description purposes)?
- **Evaluating** other sources?
- Providing **new or useful conclusions**?

Overall conclusion:

- What is your overall evaluation of the quality, reliability and objectivity of the source?