Important Questions to Ask when Evaluating Sources

We live in an era where we are flooded with information. Some of it is good, and some of it is bad. One of the important skills to learn in this context is the ability to critically evaluate particular sources of information to determine if they are reliable and useful for meeting one's information needs. Here are three aspects of a source to consider in the evaluation process:

1. AUTHORITY

If you are basing arguments in your research project in part on the facts or ideas that are presented in a particular source, it is important to consider whether that source is reliable and speaks with authority. Ask these questions:

- Who is the author of the source? What are his or her qualifications? Where does the author work and what is his or her job description? (Information about the author, such as institutional affiliation, is often included at the beginning or the end of a journal article, or on the dust jacket of a book. Websites often include an 'about us' link that can provide important information about the author. Information from anonymous Websites should be avoided when conducting scholarly research).
- Has the source been cited by other authorities in the field in their own work? (Resources like Google Scholar – scholar.google.com – can be used to help track citations).
- What else has the author written in the field? (WorldCat – www.worldcat.org – can be used to look for books written by a particular author, and research databases can be used to search for scholarly articles by particular authors.)
- How has the source or any of the author's other writings in the field been received by his or her peers? (If the source is a book, search for book reviews written about it, and if the source is a journal article (or book), find discussions by other scholars about it by using Google Scholar).
- Does the author cite sources in order to provide evidence for his or her arguments, and are these sources reliable and authoritative?
- What is the author's point of view?
- In what ways might the author be biased in his or her presentation of information? (Be sure to ask yourself what aspects of the topic the author is silent about as well as analyzing what the author has actually said.)
- Does the author have a particular agenda to promote, and how might that agenda impact his or her arguments?
- Who is the publisher of the source? Is the publisher an academic press, a professional/ scholarly organization press, or a commercial press? (For information about the publisher, it can be helpful to examine the publisher's Website.)
- If the source is a journal article, does the publisher use a peer-reviewed process in its determination of whether to accept articles for publication?
- If the source is a newspaper or popular magazine, what is its reputation?

2. TIMELINESS

Obtaining current information is important in most academic fields. Even if a source was authored by a respected authority in its field, it is possible that new facts have come to light about the issues that it addresses in the time since it was written. In some cases this new information might render obsolete some or all of the conclusions drawn by the source. Ask these questions:

- When was the source written?
- Is the source too old to be useful?
- How important is timeliness in the particular academic field being researched?
- How important is timeliness to the type of information being gathered from the source?
- Are the references cited by the author in the source current enough to maintain their relevance?

3. APPROPRIATENESS

Authors write with particular audiences and purposes in mind. A particular source might be written for high school students, college students, academic peers, or professionals. It might be written to provide a general introduction to a broad field or to address a very specific aspect of a subfield. It is important to choose sources that are appropriate for your needs. Ask these questions:

- Who is the author's intended audience?
- Is the material in the source too basic or too advanced for my needs?
- Is the source intended for a scholarly or a popular audience? (One way to help answer this question is to consider whether and to what extent the author uses citations and a bibliography, which are common elements of scholarly writing.)
- What is the scope of the source?
- Is the source too general or too specific for my needs?

USEFUL WEBSITES

Two useful Websites designed specifically to help with the difficult task of evaluating Web resources are:

- Evaluating Web Pages, from the UC Berkeley Library: (http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Evaluate.html)
- Evaluating Information Found on the Internet, from the Sheridan Libraries of Johns Hopkins University: (http://www.library.jhu.edu/researchhelp/general/evaluating)