

# How to Evaluate Information

## Why Evaluate Information?

**Information is everywhere—in books and articles, on the Web, in speeches, on TV and radio, on billboards, even on city buses and cereal boxes—but not all kinds of information are appropriate for all kinds of needs.**

**Whether you need information for an assignment or to solve a problem, it is important to critically analyze or *evaluate* the information that you find. Once you understand clearly what kind of information you have, you will know whether it is a good match for the problem or assignment at hand.**

**These guidelines are general and may be used to evaluate all kinds of information, regardless of where it appears.**

## Ask These Questions

### **Audience:**

Who is the intended audience?

- The general public?
- Scholars or experts in a field?
- Practitioners of a certain profession or trade?
- People with a selected world-view or political affiliation?

### **Scope and Coverage:**

Is the information general or specific?

Is the level of specialization appropriate for your need?

Is it a primary or secondary source?

### **Authority:**

Is the information produced by a credible source?

Who is the author? (This may be a person, or a corporation or other organization.)

What are the author's qualifications or credentials for creating this information?

If an individual, what are the author's institutional affiliations?

### **Currency or Timeliness:**

When was the information written and/or published: is it up-to-date?

If not, is it from the appropriate time period for your purposes?

### **Accuracy:**

Is the information accurate and carefully presented?

Can you verify the facts against other sources?

Is the information well documented with footnotes and/or citations and references?

Does the information contain typos, grammatical errors, or broken Web links?

### **Objectivity:**

Is the information fact or opinion?

If it is factual, is it balanced or does it present only selected facts?

Does the information exhibit a bias in language, tone, or viewpoint?

Is the information actually advertising or promotional material?

## Popular or Scholarly?

| CRITERIA                                       | POPULAR  | SCHOLARLY  |
|--|--|--|
| <b>Who is the intended audience?</b>           | A general audience without special knowledge of the topic  | Scholars, experts and others knowledgeable about the subject   |
| <b>Who wrote it?</b>                           | A journalist, professional writer or layperson without significant academic or professional credentials in the field | An acknowledged expert, such as a professor or prominent professional  |
| <b>What is the content of the publication?</b> | General interest items, "hot" topics, opinions, current news or events, introductory or overview information         | Research reports, comprehensive and detailed treatments of a specific area of study, critical reviews  |
| <b>How is it written?</b>                      | In everyday language that the average person understands   | Using jargon or terminology specific to the field, that only experts and scholars will fully understand  |
| <b>How was it edited?</b>                      | By a professional editor   | By an "editorial board" comprised of scholars in the subject who review the articles other scholars have submitted for publication, giving rise to other terms for scholarly journals: <b>peer-reviewed</b> or <b>refereed</b> |
| <b>What does it look like?</b>                 | Often glossy with colorful images and advertising  | Text, footnotes, bibliographies or references lists, charts, graphs, and tables, little advertising  |
| <b>Where can you get it?</b>                   | On newsstands everywhere   | In academic libraries or by subscription   |

## Primary or Secondary?

**Primary sources are original or first-hand materials including**

- original works of fiction such as novels, plays, poems and stories
- original works of art such as paintings, drawings, sculptures and photographs
- reports of original research by those involved in the research
- manuscripts, letters, email messages, diaries, autobiographies, interviews and other first-person accounts
- news reports of current events
- objects and artifacts
- raw data and statistics

**Secondary sources are removed one or more steps from the original item, time or creator and add a layer of interpretation made by a second party, such as.**

- summaries or analyses of other people's research
- biographies and articles about people
- reproductions of original artwork, such as a postcard from a museum.
- reviews of literary or artistic works
- analyses or histories of past events

**Not sure about a source? Ask your professor!**