



Using the 5Ws to Evaluate Information

Be critical of the information you're consuming. Ask the 5W questions (who, what, when, where, why) to help determine if a source is reliable, credible, and appropriate for your assignment.

Who? – Who is responsible for the information?

Look at author and publisher information to answer questions. For websites, the “about” section can be useful to find “Who” answers.

Question	Answer	What Your Answers Might Mean
Are the author's credentials like their education or job affiliation listed?	YES / NO	If yes, it's a good sign. An author's credentials can tell you more about whether they can be considered an expert on this topic.
Who published the book, article, or website?	Publisher:	If you recognize the publisher or the publisher includes the name of a college or university, it's a good sign. You should be critical of books that are self-published or articles and websites that are designed to shock rather than inform.
Are there advertisements in the source?	YES / NO	If yes, be cautious. Many magazines, newspapers, and websites include advertisements. It's up to you to determine whether a publication or website is allowing funding sources to influence content. If you find evidence of clear bias toward advertisers, it's best to avoid the source.
For websites, what is the domain extension?	.com .net .edu .org .gov other	.com or .net are usually commercial or personal websites. Look at other criteria to determine credibility. Websites from an educational institution (.edu) or government agency (.gov) usually contain credible information. Non-profit organizations often use .org, but anyone can register a .org domain so information can sometimes be biased. When in doubt, use other criteria to assess credibility.

What? – What is the purpose of the information?

Look at book jacket descriptions or the article abstract. Skim the table of contents and index if it's a book or the article if it's in a newspaper, magazine, academic journal, or website.

Question	Answer	What Your Answers Might Mean
Is the information presented as fact or opinion?	FACT / OPINION	Every writer has an agenda and there are different reasons to write, whether it's to inform, persuade, entertain, or something else. Look for sources in which the purpose is clear.
Does the information appear objective and impartial or without bias?	YES / NO	If yes, it's a good sign. You should avoid sources that show a clear bias or prejudice toward a topic.
Does the information accurately portray current beliefs?	YES / NO	If yes, it's a good sign. You should be especially critical of sources that stray dramatically from other information you've collected on the same topic.

When? – When was the information published?

Look for a copyright date or date of publication. In websites, it's often found at the very bottom of the page.

Question	Answer	What Your Answers Might Mean
When was the source published or last updated?	DATE:	Books take longer to compile and publish. A book published within the last two years is generally considered recent. Magazines, newspapers, journals, and websites can provide very recent information.

When? – When was the information published? (Continued from previous page.)

Question	Answer	What Your Answers Might Mean
If it's a website, are hyperlinks working?	YES / NO	If no, be critical. This could mean the website is not regularly monitored or updated.
Is your topic something that changes rapidly and would require the most current information?	YES / NO	Some topics evolve quickly (technology, popular culture, some medical topics), and will require the most current information. Other topics (history, philosophy, political issues) won't change as rapidly so a mixture of newer and older sources will likely be appropriate.

Where? Where can I verify the information?

Scan the source for in-text citations, hyperlinks, or a bibliography.

Question	Answer	What Your Answers Might Mean
Are sources cited?	YES / NO	If yes, it's a good sign. Full citations like footnotes, endnotes, or a bibliography allow you to see the works the author consulted. They also allow you to use these sources as a jumping-off point to seek out other potential resources for your assignment. Good in-text citations should give you enough information to allow you to find the original source, including names of authors, research scope, and/or hyperlinks to more information.
Are there charts, graphs, or other evidence to back up claims?	YES / NO	If yes, it's a good sign. Factual information often includes evidence in the form of specific numbers or percentages. Credible information should include original research methods or a citation stating where figures or charts were obtained.
If it's an article, is it peer reviewed?	YES / NO	If yes, you have a very credible source. Peer reviewed articles go through a rigorous screening process by other experts in the field. If no, it might still be a good source, but examine other criteria to assess credibility.
Are there statements you know to be false? Are there errors in spelling, grammar, or punctuation?	YES / NO	If yes, be cautious. Information published by reputable sources have a team of editors to ensure information is accurate and well-written.

Why? Why should I use this source?

Look at book jacket descriptions or the article abstract. If it's in a newspaper, magazine, academic journal, or on a website, scan the content for clues.

Question	Answer	What Your Answers Might Mean
Does the information help you answer your research question?	YES / NO	If yes, it's a good sign. Pay attention to your assignment parameters. The information you use should help add to your paper by providing good background information, evidence, or supporting material.
Does the information provide a good scope?	YES / NO	A book will provide you with in-depth information and maybe even historical context. Shorter articles and websites might cover very specific aspects of your topic. Well researched projects will gather information from many types of sources.
For whom was the information written?	Academics, students, someone else	Academic sources will have a more serious tone and will include supporting evidence. Avoid sources that are too elementary or too technical to be useful. Sources whose sole purpose is to entertain or shock the audience are probably not good choices for a college-level research assignment.
Did you learn something new from the source?	YES / NO	If yes, it's a good sign. College assignments are designed to develop your critical thinking skills while building your knowledge. You should always use your curiosity to your advantage and pick topics you're excited to explore.