

Evaluating Sources

Sources can be primary (original data or original sources) or secondary (texts that comment on primary texts). In either case, you should provide a proper citation. Any text can be quoted and analyzed, but in an academic context only certain kinds of sources are considered reliable. How do you know whether a source is reliable and therefore appropriate to include in your research paper?

A source can be considered dependable if:

1. It is a recognizable academic journal or publisher: a reputable university press, or any publication or person associated with a university; well-known publishers like Little Brown, Penguin, Pearson, McGraw-Hill etc.; major newspapers or magazines like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Guardian*; websites associated with universities or major newspapers and magazines.
2. The author and/or the source is cited in many other texts.
3. A teacher or professional tells you that the source has a good reputation (if in doubt, ask).
4. Generally, if you find the source in a serious context (in an academic library, for example), it is likely dependable, unless you spot any of the following warning signs.

A source may not be dependable if:

1. There is no identifiable author, no date, or no apparent publication data.
2. The author does not belong to any clearly identifiable, respectable organization, and has not been published by any respectable medium.
3. The author has no credentials to indicate any expertise in the area he is writing about.
4. The author is not mentioned by any other academic texts on the same subject.

TIP: Investigate the author's reputation by checking a "Who's Who" publication, or simply look for the author's name on Google or Wikipedia to see where else he or she has published. Reading book reviews of the author's work may also be helpful.

5. The content of the article is extremely biased or emotionally loaded.
6. The claims of the article aren't supported by or go beyond the evidence provided.
7. The article vilifies alternative viewpoints.
8. The article is trying to sell something.

TIP: Check the content against other sources. Dependable articles make arguments backed up with evidence, and acknowledge that others may disagree.

9. The publisher is not well known among experts in the field.
10. The publisher is a strongly partisan organization.

Other Things to Consider: If your subject matter is evolving, your sources should not be too old. Look for newer editions or newer publications. Also, ask yourself who the target audience of the text is. It could be that it's too simple or too sophisticated for your purposes. Finally, when you are finding sources through Internet searches, you must be more skeptical than you would be with print sources.