Guide to Evaluating Sources

Journal Articles

Experimental?

1. Random Sampling
2. IV Manipulated
3. Controlling for Extraneous Variables (i.e., confounding variables)
    1) Sampling?
        - Sampling size: Too small, too large?
        - Used a random sampling method? Simple random sampling, systematic sampling, stratified sampling, cluster sampling
        - Are subjects/participants representative of the population of interest?
    2) Independent Variable Manipulated?
        - Strength of the manipulation?
            - Too strong? (i.e., unrealistic)
            - Closer to real-world scenario?
            - Not strong enough? (i.e., producing ceiling effects)
    3) Controlling for confounding variables?
        - Demand characteristics?
        - Experimenter expectations/biases?
        - Uses single-/double-blind experimental design?
        - Environmental effects? (e.g., location, time of day)
        - Does the study use a control group?

Other Things to Consider

- Statistical Analysis Used?
    - The type of statistical analysis used for a study's hypothesis test may indicate whether astudy is experimental or correlational.
        - Comparing groups (i.e., experimental): Chi-Square, T-Tests, all types of ANOVA analyses, (e.g., ANCOVA, MANOVA)
        - Correlational studies (non-experimental): Correlation, all types of Regression analyses
- Measures/instruments/surveys used?
    - Well established/reliability tested measures? Or did they create their own for the experiment?
    - Questions asked? (e.g., leading or unbiased?)
- Internal validity requirements:
    - Temporal precedence
    - Covariation between the two variables
    - Elimination of plausible alternative explanations
- Are multiple methods used to study a variable?
- Is the article peer reviewed?

- Does the study use peer reviewed/experimental journal articles to support the premise of their study?

News Articles

Be aware of: **bias**, political **propaganda**, intentional **disinformation**, **satire**, attention-seeking **click-bait**, and **sloppy reporting**.

Source:

- Where did the story come from?
- Is it a reputable news source?
- Dig deeper to find the original source for the claim and verify how the information is used or reused.
- Check for expert consensus or historical context.
- What are the other articles or headlines in that source like? Is there a mix of quality?

Motive

- Why do they say so?
- Do they have a special interest or bias that may cause them to slant information?
- Check their "About" page to see who their affiliated with and who supports them.

Authority

- Who is the author of the story?
- What are their credentials?

Review

- Go over the story carefully.
- Are the claims supported with evidence, and are citations or links provided to that evidence? Follow the links, do they really support the article or are they contradictory?
- Dig deeper to find the original source for the claim and verify how the information is used or reused.
- Are key personalities overly praised or overly criticized?
- Is the language emotionally intense? Does it scream outrage, fear, anxiety? Look for signs of excess. Do you get angry reading it?
- Is there pressure to think, act, decide quickly?
- Look at the adjectives used to describe the event or action. Are they positive, negative, or neutral?
- Are there a lot of descriptive adjectives used? Or is the language more direct?
- Sometimes you will find articles with similar viewpoints across different sources or sites. This is normal; people who agree tend to collect the same or similar defenses of their viewpoints. However, be aware that repetition of a lie as a way to get people to believe the lie is a standard technique of propaganda. Alternatively, if a claim you are studying does not appear on any other website or published source of information, it is possible that the claim is not supported by any credible source of information.

Two-source test

- Check for other sources about the story.
- Does the two-source test confirm or contradict the story?

- Is there more reliable or in-depth information elsewhere? Use that instead!

Be aware that some sources, like Wikipedia, may pass these initial tests but still may not be acceptable for college level academic research assignments.

Websites

Web users are encouraged to employ healthy skepticism when visiting any site and to use criteria, such as those below, to gather evidence on the quality of the information in the Web site.

1. Authority: Who created the site?
    - What is their authority?
        - Do they have expertise or experience in the topic?
        - What are their credentials, institutional affiliation? Check the "About" page.
    - Is organizational information provided?
    - Does the URL suggest a reputable affiliation regarding the topic--personal or official site; type of Internet domain (i.e., .edu: educational institution; .org: non-profit organization; .com: commercial enterprise; .net: Internet Service Provider; .gov: governmental body; .mil: military body)?
2. Objectivity: Is the purpose and intention of the site clear, including any bias or viewpoint?
    - Are the purpose and scope stated?
    - Who is the intended audience?
    - Is the information clearly presented as being factual or opinion, primary or secondary in origin?
    - What criteria are used for inclusion of information?
    - Are sponsorship or funding sources fully disclosed?
3. Accuracy: Is the information presented accurate?
    - Are the facts documented or well researched?
    - Are the facts like those reported in related print or other online sources?
    - Are the Web resources for which links are provided quality sites?
4. Currency: Is the information current?
    - Is the content current?

- Are the pages date-stamped with the last update?

5. Usability: Is the site well-designed and stable?
    - Is the site organization logical and easy to maneuver?
    - Is the content written at a level that is readable by the intended audience?
    - Has attention been paid to presenting the information as error-free (e.g., spelling, punctuation) as possible?
    - Is there a readily identifiable link back to the institutional or organizational home page?
    - Is the site reliably accessible?