The ability to evaluate the quality of information sources is one of the most essential information literacy skills, especially given the overwhelming amount of information available both online and in print.

The ease of internet search can foster an over-reliance on search result rankings as an arbiter of a source’s credibility. This concern goes beyond the proliferation of “fake news.” Even if online information is accurate, it may not have the depth, specificity, or authority appropriate for the given research assignment or creative project.

This nuance is difficult for novice researchers to parse. Even researchers who identify the importance of checking an author’s credentials rarely do in practice. To facilitate a conversation around evaluating information sources, it is best to start with familiar language that builds on existing knowledge, rather than rely on academic jargon (see sidebar).

EVALUATING SOURCES BASED ON USE

One important concept in information literacy is that authority is constructed and contextual. Sources should be evaluated “based on the information need and the context in which the information will be used.” The intended use defines the criteria by which an information source can be judged.

More experienced researchers might be comfortable evaluating sources following the use-based model developed by Columbia’s Joseph Bizup.

Evaluating Sources with the Five W’s

The Five W’s are a good entry point for novice researchers to join a conversation about evaluating sources.

Who: The author(s) or creator(s) of an information source, as well as the sources they cite (or don't).
What: The quality of the content, as judged by writing and presentation.
When: Is the information source current or out-of-date? Can it be established when the information source was published?
Where: Where has the information been published? Does the publisher, website, or web domain add or detract from the credibility of the source?
Why: Why has this information source been created? Questions of purpose, bias, and audience come into play.

Background: Sources regarded as factual: biographical information, definitions, dates, chronology, statistics, etc. Accuracy is the paramount criteria for background sources. Reference works, verifiable news sources, and textbooks can make excellent background material.

Exhibits: Sources that the creator intends to comment upon or interpret: primary sources, works of art, architectural plans, etc. Rather than supporting a claim, exhibits serve as an opportunity to express a claim. The relevance of the exhibits to the researcher’s central argument is the foremost criteria when evaluating such sources.

Arguments: Sources invoked for the purpose of supporting a claim. These sources provide analysis, original research, or expertise that comments upon the research question. The authority of the information source — both author and publisher — establishes credibility for these sources, which might be peer-reviewed articles, research-oriented websites, monographs, reviews, or editorials.
Teaching Web Evaluation: A Three-Stage Lesson Plan

Instructional librarians at Radford University developed a constructivist approach to teaching web evaluation based on cognitive development theory. It builds on the students’ existing experience and motivates small groups through competition. To complete the entire lesson plan would take about 75 minutes of class time.

Setup: The students are divided into groups of two or three. Each group will require the use of one computer. The instructor has selected one website in advance that relates to the topic of an upcoming research assignment but is definitively problematic for multiple reasons.

Stage One
• The class is given the pre-selected website to evaluate. The students are told up-front that it is a bad information source, creating a safe environment for discussion.
• Each group is provided with five to seven minutes to determine at least five reasons they would not consider the pre-selected website to be credible.
• The groups are then asked to share their findings with the class. The instructor takes notes on the whiteboard, grouping similar findings — these groupings often align with the Five W’s (see reverse).

Stage Two
• Based on their critique of the first website, the groups are asked to develop their own benchmarks for a strong source on the same subject. If the instructor already grouped the critiques by the Five W’s, the groups can use those as a starting point for developing their standards.
• After each group develops their own standards, the instructor leads a class discussion to develop consensus standards.

Stage Three
• The groups compete to find a source that best lives up to the standards they have established for credibility.
• Each group presents and defends their source to the rest of the class.
• Class concludes with a secret ballot to determine which source was the most credible.

Notes
1. California College of the Arts. "Undergraduate College-wide Learning Outcomes." https://www.cca.edu/about/administration/academic-affairs/outcomes
3. Ibid.

Do you have an activity, tool, or pedagogy you would like to share? Is there a topic you would like to see explored? Please email ideas and suggestions for future handouts to refdesk@cca.edu. Download electronic copies of the TSS Circular and subscribe to our mailing list at http://libguides.cca.edu/pedagogy.