

How to Analyze if a Source is Credible

This blog post could have been entitled “How to Judge if a Source is Credible.” However, I chose the word “analyze,” because you will need to ask yourself a series of questions before you can judge if a source is credible. The process of asking those questions is a form of analysis. You will get the experience of analyzing one of your sources using a worksheet with a series of questions that will help you ultimately decide if the source is credible.

1. Begin by watching the library’s [4 minute video on evaluating sources](#).

2. Ask yourself **who** created the source and begin to ask **why**. What if there is no obvious author [the word author will be used for all types of source creators] for the source? If there is no obvious author for a source, **examine the website for the source**. What kind of website is it? Is it a business (look for a .com domain) or is it not a business? Does it sell a product or service? If it has a .gov domain, it is a government website that is informative. Non-profit websites, .org, may also be informative. Other sources, for example, music videos, exist purely to entertain. When you examine **why the source was created**, it is helpful to identify the **audience** for the source!

Here are some examples:

Broad types of authors	Why they create a source	Audience	Where could you find this genre? All are found in the library AND on the Internet
Artistic	Artists, musicians, and other creative people entertain or share creative work to express themselves. They may also be seeking to sell their creations.	Anyone	YouTube for videos, other websites, streaming services, music sites like Bandcamp
Commercial	Companies create websites and have advertising to sell a product or service	Consumers and other companies who might purchase the product or service	.com websites
Political and others with agendas	To persuade an individual to change their mind on an issue. For example, the anti-vaxxer movement or political campaign ads.	Anyone. Seeks to communicate to non-experts.	Anywhere. Active on social media
Journalistic	Journalists (news professionals) report on current events using investigative skills. Journalists also write editorial or op ed pieces where they take a position.	Anyone. Seeks to chiefly communicate to non-experts.	Radio, newspapers, television, websites for journalism

Informative	To share important information, e.g. health information	Anyone. Seeks to communicate to non-experts.	Non-profit websites (.org) and government websites (.gov). TED Talks may be informative
Scholarly	Professors, researchers publish their original research	Other professors and researchers (experts) are the main audience. College students and others are a secondary audience	Google Scholar, library
Educational	To teach a skill or a topic. The creator can be a professor or be a non-professor	Anyone. It depends on the skill or topic. Seeks to communicate to non-experts.	For college-related learning, .edu websites. For skills, YouTube and other websites as well as “how to” books and articles

3. How do you judge if a source is important and why? How is the library different from the Internet?

This requires looking inwards and outwards. **Looking inwards**, relate the source back to the question you are asking. Does the source begin to answer your question either directly or indirectly? **Looking outwards**, you will want to learn more about the author and why they created the source. Although you can do some [lateral reading](#) about your author or an organization (running a quick Google search), this blog post seeks instead to give you a framework to think about different kinds of sources and how to evaluate them. A good way to begin to judge if a source is important is by considering the **expertise** of the author.

Expertise depends on context. If you want to learn from someone through lived experience and firsthand observation, an interview is best whether you conduct the interview or read or view a video of an interview. Other experts are recognized people with extensive, rich experience and knowledge of a topic. Organizations well-known for their work in an area are also experts. Perhaps your author is famous or has been recognized as an expert. How do you judge if someone or an organization is an expert? It takes time and experience and is a learning process. You might have to ask for help. Sources you find through the library are generally trustworthy because they have been through processes where editors, librarians, professors, and others decided that the source was good enough to be published or otherwise shared out. This is called **vetting or gatekeeping**. Sources you find on the Internet may or may not have gone through any vetting or gatekeeping.

Editors and others play a very important role in gatekeeping information. In practice, that means that facts are checked, text and other content is examined for clarity, and otherwise experts are deciding if a source is good enough to be published or released online. **Social media** (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, blogs, Wikipedia, Yelp, Reddit), depending on the platform, entirely or partially *removes the gatekeeper*.

The removal of the gatekeeper is good in some cases. For example, non-famous musicians can put their music up on Bandcamp for anyone to listen to and purchase. Having no gatekeeper is more problematic if you are looking for reliable sources. Use social media with skepticism, particularly social media entirely focused on user opinions like RateMyProfessor and Yelp. This is because people with more extreme opinions will take the time to post. Until you become more expert on a topic, be thoughtful, and do not hesitate to ask for help. Expertise comes with time and experience.

Bias, transparency, neutrality, and the challenge of balance. **Bias** means that the author is prejudiced and may be cherry-picking evidence to support their opinion. When someone is biased, they are likely to dismiss other opinions or even be unaware of different perspectives. However, the author might be writing for a very specific audience who shares a perspective with the author. It is difficult to be entirely unbiased because sometimes, we are unaware of our own biases. **Transparency** means the author is open that they are expressing an opinion or selling a product. News editorials, or op eds (opinion editorials), which are distinctive from news reporting, are a transparent genre: as a genre, they express an opinion. **Neutrality**, which traditionally has been central to the ethos or values of journalists, is the goal of considering multiple positions on a topic and attempting to achieve balance. For example, a problem will affect different people differently. There is no perfect neutrality, but many authors strive to be neutral. Different genres may or may not strive to be unbiased, transparent, and/or neutral. When you do research, you will be encountering different perspectives and opinions. When you write, you may be asked to think about these perspectives and how they relate to the intended audience for the source and the genre the author uses.

Analyze one of your sources using this worksheet:

Full citation to a source you plan to use for this class, in MLA format (find help here)		
Where did you find this source?	<input type="radio"/> Google search <input type="radio"/> Library	
Type of source?	<input type="radio"/> Book <input type="radio"/> Newspaper article <input type="radio"/> Magazine article <input type="radio"/> Scholarly journal article <input type="radio"/> Website or blog post <input type="radio"/> Other social media <input type="radio"/> Video	How do you know? If you are not sure of the answer, explain why.

What kind of person authored your source?	<input type="radio"/> Professor or researcher <input type="radio"/> Journalist <input type="radio"/> Creative (artist, musician) <input type="radio"/> Government or non-profit organization <input type="radio"/> Business <input type="radio"/> No author or other (if "other," state what)	How do you know? If you are not sure of the answer, explain why.
Is the author open or transparent about its purpose, e.g. a newspaper editorial deliberately expresses an opinion	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No	How do you know? If you are not sure of the answer, explain why.
Does the source seem to be biased or does it provide multiple perspectives and attempt to balance these perspectives?	<input type="radio"/> Biased <input type="radio"/> Multiple perspectives	How do you know? If you are not sure of the answer, explain why.
Do you think this source is credible?	How do you know? If you are not sure of the answer, explain why.	