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THE ROUGHWRITER'S GUIDE

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10. Evaluating Sources

Evaluating Sources

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As mentioned previously, the quality of your sources is an important factor in establishing your credibility with your audience. When you evaluate a source, you need to consider the seven core points shown below:
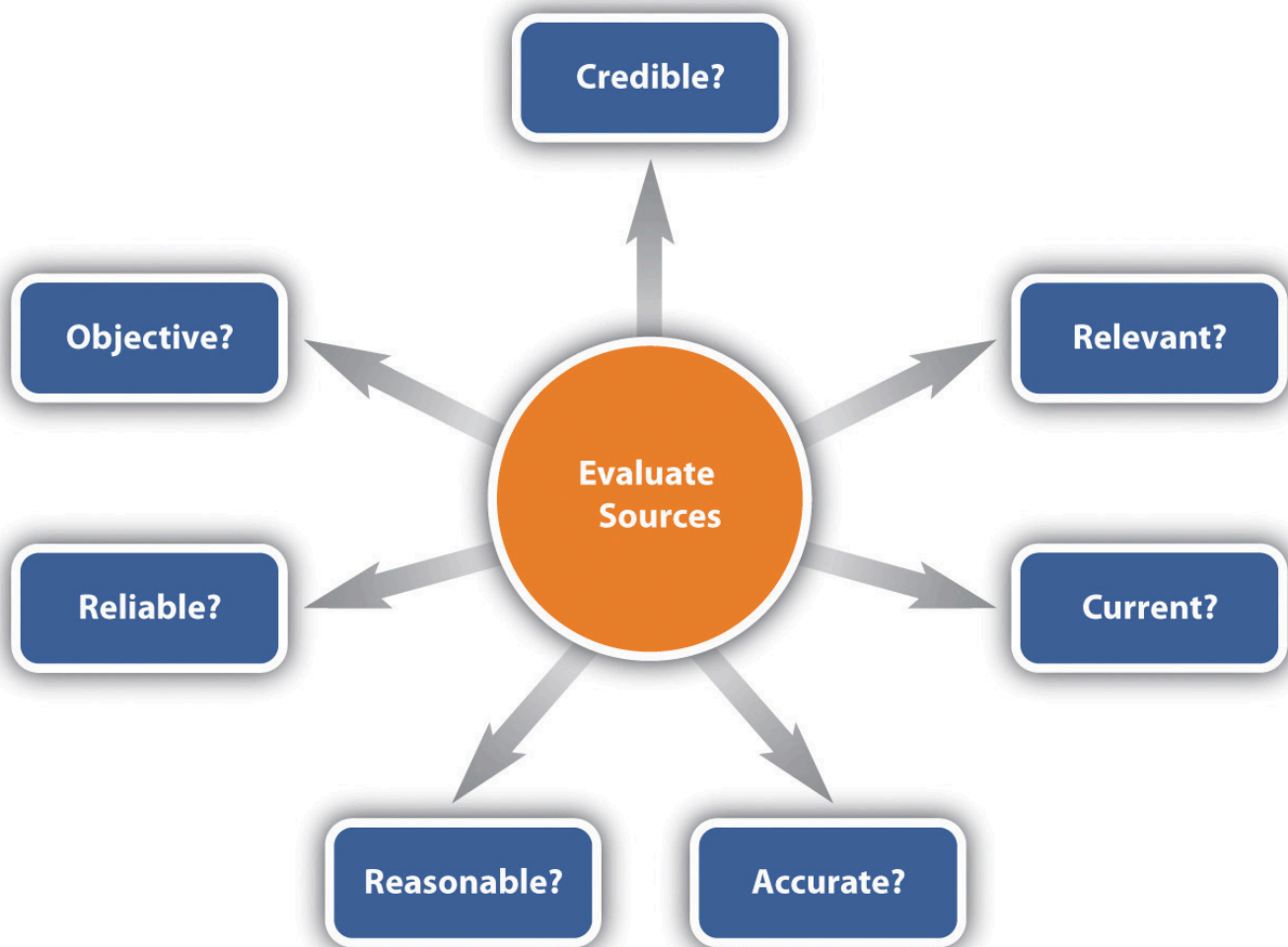
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1. *Credible.*

A **credible** source is one that has solid backing by a reputable person or organization with the authority and expertise to present the information. The credibility of a source can be determined in many ways. Always think and read critically so you aren't fooled.

- When you haven't heard of an author, you can often judge whether an author is credible by reading his or her biography. If no biography is available, you can research the author yourself.
- Check for spelling and grammatical errors.
- Look for logical fallacies and author bias. Does the author make reasonable claims, support them with reliable evidence, and appear to treat any opposing

voices with respect?

- Judge the credibility of an online source by looking at the site's domain name. A .gov site, for example, is a site published by the government, which we can assume is credible. A .com site generally indicates a commercial or for profit site. A .edu site might be credible, but many institutions give students webspace, as well, so don't assume that an .edu site is created by a university or a professor.

Domain Names and Website Types

Domain	Website Type
.edu	Educational
.com	Commercial, for-profit, business
.gov	Government
.mil	Military
.net	Network
.org	Not-for-profit organization

2. *Relevant.*

Is the source relevant to your topic? A source is **relevant** if it can contribute to your paper in a meaningful way, which might include any of the following:

- Supplies support for core argument(s)
- Adds a sense of authority to your argument(s)
- Contributes background information

- Provides other viewpoints
- Offers definitions and explanations that your audience will need for clarification

For example, if I were to write an essay about creating a community garden on a college campus, a source relating the history of community gardens might be relevant, but one discussing the creation of a campus garden might be even more relevant to my topic.

3. Current/Timely.

When determining if a source is **current** enough to use, a general rule of thumb is that a source must be no more than ten years old. In some situations, very few sources exist that were published within the last ten years, so older sources can be used as long as you explain why the use of the older sources is acceptable and meaningful. Or perhaps you may be using older sources to establish a historical record of thoughts and statements on your issue in question. Check the date the source was published. If the topic is very current, older sources may not add useful information. If the topic is historical, older sources may help put the issue in perspective. For example, a 1997 report on elderly drivers may or may not be helpful in an argument about elderly drivers 23 years later in 2020.

4. Accurate.

Before you use a source, you need to satisfy yourself that the information is **accurate**. In print sources, you can use the author (if known) and the publisher to help you decide. If you think the author and publisher are legitimate sources, then you are probably safe in assuming that their work is accurate. In the case of online information, in addition to considering the author and publisher, you can look at how long ago the site was updated, if evidence is provided to back up statements, and if the information appears to be thorough. For either print or online sources, you can check accuracy by finding other sources that support the facts in question.

5. *Reasonable.*

You can deem a source to be **reasonable** if it makes overall sense as you read through it. In other words, use your personal judgment to determine if you think the information the source provides sounds plausible.

6. *Reliable.*

Reliable sources do not show bias or conflict of interest. They do present verifiable information. Sources that do not give citations or references are not reliable because the information given cannot be verified. In written sources, documentation is usually provided within the text and in a references page, as well. Internet sources may have documentation incorporated, or they may simply include hyperlinks to the source itself. If you are unsure about the reliability of a source, check to see if it includes a list of references, and then track down a sampling of those references. Also, check the publisher. Reliable publishers rarely involve themselves with unreliable information.

7. Objective.

A source is **objective** if it provides both sides of an argument or more than one viewpoint. Although you can use sources that do not provide more than one viewpoint, you need to balance them with sources that provide other viewpoints.In addition: *Diverse*. Does the author utilize sources that all come from the same website, for example, or sources all written by the same author, or does the author's work contain references from a wide variety of perspectives?

Exercise 1

1. Choose a research topic of interest to you. Find one source that is both related to the overall topic and relevant to your specific topic. Describe the relevant role the source could make (support, authority, background, view-

points, or knowledge). Find a second source that is related to the overall topic but not as relevant to your specific topic.

2. Find a source that you think is not acceptable due to not being accurate, reasonable, reliable, or objective. Share the source with your classmates and explain why you have deemed the source as unacceptable.

3. Choose a research topic of interest to you. Find two sources with information that relate to your topic—one that is credible and one that is not credible. Explain what makes one credible and the other not credible.

Practice Evaluating a Text Source

Exercise 2

1. Use the following questions to evaluate a text source:

- Who is the author?
- What type—or genre—of source is it?
- What kind of audience does the author anticipate?
- What is the author's primary purpose?
- What are the author's sources of information?

2. Decide on the overall credibility of the source:

Excellent   Good   Fair   Poor

3. Provide a Reason for your Evaluation:

- Credible
  - trustworthiness of the source, author's credentials
  - publisher or sponsoring organization reputable
  - author a specialist in field
- Relevant
  - information relevant to research topic

- Current

  - if currency of information relevant to topic: up-to-date publication with recent copyright date
  - updates provided if new information should be considered to increase knowledge base

- Accurate

  - claims supported
  - facts and statistics backed by verifiable research or studies
  - presence of bibliography indicating what research was done

- Reasonable
- Reliable

  - no obvious conflicts of interest
  - fallacies absent; lack of bias

- Objective

  - information presented in fair, balanced, objective
  - both sides of issue presented or clearly stated point of view

- Diverse

Practice Evaluating an Online Source

Exercise 3

1. Use the following questions to evaluate an online source:

- Who is the author?
- What type—or genre—of source is it?
- What kind of audience does the author anticipate?
- What is the author's primary purpose?
- What are the author's sources of information?

2. Decide on the overall credibility of the source:

Excellent   Good   Fair   Poor

3. Provide a Reason for your Evaluation:

- Credible

  - author clearly identified,
  - author's credentials listed
  - affiliation of the author with a reputable organization
  - if organization is involved, there is a way provided to contact organization
  - possible to verify credibility of author and/or organization
  - site does not require passwords or memberships
  - lack of typos or other signs of sloppiness
  - presence of editor or someone who verifies the information

- Relevant

  - information relevant to research topic

- Current

  - clear when information was published and last updated
  - version studied is most current
  - current links to other Web pages
  - site maintained and updated frequently

- Accurate

  - information mirrors or matches other information sources, including print
  - if page contains advertising, can clearly distinguish between ads and content
  - claims supported
  - hyperlinks to additional information included
  - presence of bibliography indicating what research was done

- Reasonable

  - information seems reasonable and/or verifiable
  - content presented in organized, functional way

- Reliable

  - fallacies absent; lack of bias
  - no obvious conflicts of interest
  - easy way to search the site or help feature

- Objective

  - both sides of issue presented or clearly stated point of view
  - facts and statistics backed by verifiable research or studies

- Diverse

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