**Evaluating Research Sources**

Locating effective supporting material is an essential aspect of speech planning and delivery. Finding an accurate and reliable source to draw from should be one of your key considerations. When we talk about finding or using a “source, ” you should be able to tell your audience where you found the material that you chose to support your ideas. Luckily, you will never lack sources; the world is full of them. The information that you need to support your ideas can be found online, in books, periodicals, magazines, and newspapers, to name a few. It has been our experience that college students often understand better than anyone how to locate sources; the problem for most students, however, is evaluating the reliability and validity of the information that they’ve found. Some sources are less reliable than others, so it is essential that you evaluate each potential source before deciding to include or exclude the information from that source. Using the following three criteria as you consider each source will help you to correctly evaluate the quality of the information you have found.

**Recency**

The first criterion to consider is the recency of your information. When you evaluate recency, you are primarily looking at the dates of your sources and the information reported at that time. When was this article written? How long ago were these findings reported? More importantly, is the data in this article still valid and current? These are important questions to consider, especially if your topic depends on the latest trends, current events, or research, which constantly evolves. Certainly, news broadcasts, newspapers, and recent magazine or book publications would provide you with current data.

Whether recency is of critical importance in your research will be decided primarily by your topic and your purpose. If your purpose is to discuss the latest cutting-edge treatments for cancer, then recency is a vital component for that speech. On the other hand, if your purpose is to review how cancer treatments have changed over the past decade, recency is not as crucial. Your intent in the latter speech would be to give a historical overview of cancer treatments, moving from earlier findings to more updated research. Obviously, your goal should be to find the most current data available to support your claims and ideas, but there are other criteria that you must consider as well.

**Authorship**

A second criterion to examine is authorship , which can be thought of in this way: who wrote or compiled the information that you are considering, and how much knowledge does this person have of your subject? Would your audience immediately recognize the name of the author because s/he is well known or is considered to be an expert in her/his field? What credentials does the author have that make you feel that s/he is knowledgeable in this area? Perhaps you’ll find that this person has a degree in that area or that s/he has written fifteen books on the subject. Examining the author’s position in the organization and/or her/his title Director of Research, Head Investigator, Certified Mechanic, Vice President, etc. may also give you a better idea of the author’s level of knowledge and experience.

Keep in mind, however, that while titles and degrees do provide insight into a source’s overall competence, these are not the only indicators of validity. Personal experience or eyewitness accounts can be equally compelling and reliable. A book researched and written by a university history professor might provide important details and dates to support your topic of famous WWII battles. However, audience members would probably also find that a veteran’s personal account of these battles is equally valid.

Allen Kruger states that many Americans simply accept news without validation; we believe the final criterion to examine for each of your sources is source integrity . Checking the integrity of your sources means that you’re ensuring that your source is sound, complete, and has no hidden agendas or other conflicts that could possibly impact the reliability of the source. For instance, you find information from a Website that accuses your city’s mayor of corruption. The source seems to have all the facts a federal investigator is reviewing the records from the city’s accounting office, and there are dates and locations listed where the mayor has met with special interest groups to receive kickbacks. You decide that this source is a perfect example to use in your speech on the rising levels of corruption in government. Indeed, you may be right. This information would be interesting and relevant on such a topic if the integrity of the source can be trusted. Checking the integrity of a source brings us back to our first criterion. Who is the author? Is the author a well-known and trusted journalist who has been investigating this story for months and is known for her/ his factual reporting? Or is the author a city employee who was fired recently and holds a grudge against the mayor? Being fired doesn’t necessarily make this employee’s story untrue, but it should encourage you to do further research before using this Website as your sole source of information. This source may have a hidden agenda for reporting this information; s/he may want revenge for being fired or wish to embarrass the city and the mayor.

It is also important to note that some sources even legitimate, mainstream sources may have some bias or slant in their reporting. Vivian Martin discusses some of the online news sources have been accused of bias. Some sources will acknowledge that the information provided is filtered through his or her outlook on the world; some may not be as forthcoming. Also note that some sources allow contributors and/or contributions that have not been validated. Wikipedia is the perfect example. By its own admission, Wikipedia is the “free encyclopedia that anyone can edit. ” While much of the information found on Wikipedia may be factual, it is often impossible to determine which data has been checked for accuracy and which data has been added by an unknown source that may lack validity. At this time, we feel it is important to stress that Wikipedia should not be used as a source for your research. Most, if not all, instructors will not give credit for a Wikipedia citation.