Source Analysis

Analyzing methods of analysis to assess the quality and reliability of sources.

CURRENCY----RELEVANCY--------AUTHORITY----------ACCURACY----------PURPOSE

You have articles and books in hand. Now it's time to evaluate their quality.

Consider a parallel situation: let's say you're new to campus and you've decided to join an organization in order to meet people. How do you evaluate which organization fits you best? You gather information about several organizations by doing the following:

- exploring club web sites, which list social events and service opportunities
- talking with your advisor, who identifies activities that would look good on your resume
- reaching out to club officers, who invite you to sit in on a meeting and ask questions

You **evaluate** your choices in light of your own interests and goals. You find the organization that fits you best.

Doing research is similar. You'll find plenty of sources of information, but some will fit your assignment better than others. In this section, you'll learn how to closely examine your sources using the C.R.A.A.P method to determine their reliability and usefulness, then identify strategies for incorporating these sources into your own work.

What You Will Learn to Do

- analyze strategies for evaluating the rhetorical context (author, purpose, audience) of a source
- analyze the relationship between a potential source and the writing task
- analyze strategies for evaluating the authority, reliability, and effectiveness of a source
- analyze strategies for comparison and synthesis between multiple sources

Reading and Using Your Sources

Multiple Readings

Finding information is just the beginning of research. The next step is determining if the information you find adds to your argument and is credible, reliable, and useful. Some sources can be outdated, biased, or just plain wrong, and using that information makes it a lot more difficult for you to present a convincing argument.

In order to ensure the appropriateness of a source for your research, you should expect to read through each source at least twice.

The First Reading

During the first reading you should analyze the rhetorical context of the source. This includes examining the reasons the author wrote the work and his or her intended audience. Start by looking for the topic and the thesis. What is the author's stated purpose? What kind of evidence does he or she use to support the argument? What is the author saying? What is her purpose? The author could be trying to explain, inform, anger, persuade, amuse, motivate, sadden, ridicule, attack, or defend. Once you understand the argument and purpose, you can begin to evaluate the argument.

The Second Reading

During the second reading, you want to take notes and determine how to utilize the source in your own research. This is the time to think about whether you agree or disagree with the source, and whether you have any commentary that you would like to make about the author's argument. Determine whether you find the author credible or not. If you do, and if the author's purpose and argument support your own, you can begin incorporating the source into your own writing. If you find the author credible but disagree with his purpose, it can still be valuable to consider the source in your own writing so that you can anticipate and acknowledge counterarguments later in your essay.

Finally, remember to pay attention to quotation marks as you read. It's important to note whether the author of a text is writing, or if she is quoting someone else. Quotation marks are a helpful tool that authors use to help readers in distinguishing their voice from those of others. By paying attention to quotations and other cited material, you may also gain leads on other sources and authors you can incorporate in your paper.

Determining Usefulness

While reading through your sources, you should determine if and how they will be useful for your research. Below are lists of reasons to decide that a piece of information is or is not useful for your project.

Potentially include information if it:

- contains facts/opinions that you need
- contains illustrations or data you need
- contains an overview to establish the context of your paper
- was written by a well-known authority or expert
- contains a point of view that illustrates something you are trying to establish
- exemplifies something or shows an example of something to support your argument
- may have a clear explanation of something

Potentially exclude information if it:

- is not from a scholarly journal
- is from a scholarly journal but is too difficult for you to understand
- is out of date
- doesn't have the point of view you are researching
- doesn't contain any new information.
- is too narrow (or too broad) in coverage

Video: Evaluating Sources

How can you know if information is appropriate for your research? Take a look at its "craap"! The C.R.A.A.P. method is a way to determine the validity and relevance of a source. C.R.A.A.P. stands for

- **C**urrency. When was the information published?
- **R**elevance. How relevant to your goals is the information?
- **A**uthority. How well does the author of the information know the information?
- **A**ccuracy. How reliable is the information?
- **P**urpose. Why does this information exist in this way?

If the source you're looking at is fairly current, relevant, and accurate, it's probably a good source to use. Depending on the aim of your paper, you'll be looking for an authority and purpose that are unbiased and informative.

Currency

Currency is important because information can quickly become obsolete. Supporting your thesis statement with facts that have been superseded by new research or recent events weakens your argument. Of course, not all assignments require the most current information; older materials can provide an historical or comprehensive understanding of your topic.
How do you know if the timeliness of your information is appropriate?

- When was the information published or last updated?
- Have newer articles been published on your topic?
- Are links or references to other sources up to date? Is your topic in an area that changes rapidly, like technology or popular culture?

Relevance

Relevance is important because you are expected to support your ideas with pertinent information. A source detailing Einstein's marriage and family life would not be germane to his theories in physics.

How do you know if your source is relevant?

- Does the information answer your research question?
- Does the information meet the stated requirements of the assignment?
- Is the information too technical or too simplified for you to use?
- Does the source add something new to your knowledge of your topic?

Authority

Authority is important in judging the credibility of the author's assertions. In a trial regarding DNA evidence, a jury gives far more authority to what a genetics specialist has to say compared to someone off the street.

How do you know if an author is an authority on your topic?

- What are the author's credentials?
- Is the author affiliated with an educational institution or prominent organization?
- Can you find information about the author from reference books or the Internet?
- Do other books or articles cite the author?

Accuracy

Accuracy is important because you want to build your own argument around correct information. If the source you find is written by someone in authority, then chances are good that it will also be accurate. Sometimes, however, an expert in one subject area may write or say something out of their field of knowledge, making that information unreliable or potentially inaccurate. Even experts may perpetuate myths or misconceptions.

How do you know if your source is accurate?

- Are there statements you know to be false?
- Are there errors in spelling, punctuation, or grammar?
- Was the information reviewed by editors or subject experts before it was published?
- What citations or references support the author's claims?
- What do other people have to say about the topic?

Purpose

Purpose is important because books, articles, and Web pages exist to educate, entertain, or sell a product or point of view. Some sources may be frivolous or commercial in nature, providing inadequate, false, or biased information. Other sources are more ambiguous concerning their partiality. Varied points of view can be valid, as long as they are based upon good reasoning and careful use of evidence.

How do you determine the purpose of your source?

- Why did the author or publisher make this information available?
- Is there an obvious bias or prejudice?
- Are alternative points of view presented?
- Does the author omit important facts or data that might disprove a claim?
- Does the author use strong or emotional language?

Evaluating Websites

When looking at any source, the key questions to ask yourself are 1. who is writing this, and 2. why?

When looking for sources–particularly websites–think about whether or not they are reliable. You want your paper to contain sources written by unbiased and professional experts, not businessmen with commercial interests. The C.R.A.A.P method is a fabulous tool for assessing the credibility and reliability of sources, as a starting point. Additional questions you may want to consider when investigating a website include:

Author

- Who is providing the information?
- What do you know about him/her and his/her credentials?
- Is he/she an expert?
- Can you find out more and contact him/her?
- Search for author or publisher in search engine. Has the author written several publications on the topic?

- Does the author support the information with works cited or links to other sources?

Publisher

- Is there a sponsor or affiliation?
- Who is linking to the page?
- Do they take responsibility for the content?

Bias

- Does the organization or author indicate there will be bias?
- Is the purpose of the website to inform or to spread an agenda?
- Is there an “About” link?
- Is the site personal, commercial, governmental, organizational, or educational? (.com, .gov, .org, .edu)
- Are there ads? Are they trying to make money?
- Why did they write the article?
- Is the site a content farm? (A content farm is a site whose content has been generated by teams of low-paid freelancers who write large amounts of text to raise the site’s search engine rankings.)

Citations

- Copy and paste a sentence into Google to see if the text can be found elsewhere.
- Are there links to related sites? Are they organized?
- Are citations or a bibliography provided?

Currency

- When was the source last updated?
- Does the source even have a date?

Design

- Is the source professional?
- Does it seem like current design?
- Is the website user-friendly?
- What kinds of images are used?
- Is the navigation menu well-labeled?
- Are there spelling or grammar errors?
- Do the pages appear uncluttered?
- Are there ads or pop-ups on the page?
- Are links working?

Reproduced

- Was it reproduced? If so, from where? Type a sentence in Google to verify.
- If it was reproduced, was it done so with permission? Is copyright/disclaimer included?

Keep in mind that everything is written from a particular social, cultural, and political perspective. Realize that some publications tend to be ‘slanted’ towards a certain viewpoint. For example, the CATO Institute is known for being libertarian, while The Nation is known to lean left, politically. Keep these slants in mind when you are researching.

Synthesizing Sources

Once you have analyzed the texts involved in your research and taken notes, you must turn to the task of writing your essay. The goal is here is not simply to summarize your findings. *Critical writing requires that you communicate your analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of those findings to your audience*.

Any soldier who has gone through boot camp knows about being broken down before being “remade” or built up again. The analysis and synthesis parts of research are similar. Unlike analyzing, which breaks ideas down into parts, synthesizing

involves bringing them together.

These questions can help you synthesize and process your notes:

1. What do your sources have in common? At first glance, you might see only that the topic is loosely connected but look for connective themes among subtopics.
2. How can you merge what you have discovered and find your own voice? This is where you turn back to your notes, especially if you made a double-entry journal where you recorded your own thoughts on each idea.
3. Staying true to context and intent, which ideas are the best ideas to use?
4. What patterns can you identify, and what conclusions can you draw?
5. What disagreements among sources do you notice? Which view do you trust more and why?

Integrating Material from Sources

Integrating materials from sources into your own text can be tricky; if we consider the metaphor that writing a paper and including sources is a way of facilitating a conversation about a topic, it helps us to think about how this will best work.

When you're discussing a topic in person with one or more people, you will find yourself referencing outside sources: "When I was watching the news, I heard them say that . . . I read in the newspaper that . . . John told me that . . ." These kinds of phrases show instances of using a source in conversation, and ways that we automatically shape our sentences to work references to the sources into the flow of conversation.

Think about this next time you try to work a source into a piece of writing: if you were speaking this aloud in conversation, how would you introduce the material to your listeners? What information would you give them in order to help them understand who the author was, and why their view is worth referencing? After giving the information, how would you then link it back to the point you were trying to make? Just as you would do this in a conversation if you found it necessary to reference a newspaper article or television show you saw, you also need to do this in your essays.

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