

EVALUATING SOURCES (PODCAST 22 TRANSCRIPT)

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Greetings everyone. This is Kurtis Clements with another effective writing podcast. In this episode, I am going to discuss what you should keep in mind when evaluating sources that you may use in an essay that requires research.

Whenever you are writing a research-based essay, or really any kind of communication in which you use an outside source, your focus should be on finding the highest quality sources you can find and use that information. Too often folks look for evidence that fits their purpose, paying little or no regard to the actual source itself. While you certainly want to use compelling evidence, if that evidence resides in a not-so-credible or questionable source, then how compelling will that evidence really be?

Think about it this way: Let's say you need to buy a used car. You go to Jimbo's Fly-by-Night Big Deal Used Cars, a place that you had never heard of before, but which you stumbled upon by chance. Jimbo's has the perfect used car for you--affordable, low-mileage, and an attractive new candy apple red paint job. You look over the car history fact sheet taped to the passenger-side window and notice the word "Unknown" written after the question, "Has this car ever been totaled as the result of a collision or water damage?" You notice other missing information, too, such as the previous owner of the automobile. Do you buy this car? Of course not, right?

When conducting research, let's say you find some terrific content on the Web that absolutely helps you illustrate your point, but the website is a personal site whose author has unknown credentials and advertisements blink down the right-hand side of the screen. As you look more closely, you notice there is no "last updated" information, so you don't know how long the content has been published. What do you do? Do you use such content? Well, do you? Of course not, right? Right. You need to remember that just because you can find information on the web, it doesn't mean it is good information.

Your job when conducting research is to locate quality sources that may prove useful in helping you support points in your composition. Your first order of business is to **evaluate** potential sources carefully. Evaluating sources requires you to read the material that you have located--perhaps spot-skimming initially and then devoting more attention to the content. I suggest two reads (and admittedly there are variables that need to be taken into consideration such as the length of the content you have located).

During the first read, get a feel for what the content is saying, particularly in terms of how useful the content actually will be in helping you achieve your purpose. During the second read, use a pen or highlighter or some other method to identify specific content within a source that will be useful so



that you can easily find it at a later time; also, it is a good idea to annotate the margins with commentary as to the exact nature of the content you have identified. Doing this kind of legwork, while time consuming up front, is a genuine time-saver later in the process. To help you decide what sources are worth keeping and what ones are not, you can apply what I call The Three R's for evaluating sources.

Each of the sources that you use in your composition should meet the standards of being **reliable**, **recent**, and **repetitive**. Ultimately, your paper's merits will hinge in large part on the quality of the outside material you use to support what you say. Using material from sources that leave questions in your readers' minds will not bode well for your credibility and could, in fact, jeopardize the strength and merit of what you have to say.

A reliable source means the information is credible and unbiased. The author has firsthand knowledge of the subject and presents the information in a fair and impartial manner. If the author does not have first-hand knowledge, then you need to make sure that the information the author uses comes from sources that are reliable. Information that cannot be verified will not be reliable, so you need to exercise caution.

You also need to consider the publication/source itself and any bias that may exist. A publication with an agenda will only publish content that subscribes to a particular point of view and if you want to do quality research, you will need to avoid such sources. Asking some or all of the following questions will help you decide if the source is reliable or not.

- Who is the author?
- What are his/her credentials?
- Where and when was the information published?
- Is the source objective?

In other words, is the content something you would find at Jimbo's Fly-by-Night Big Deal Used Cars, or is the content something you would find at a reputable dealership?

As a general rule of thumb, the information you use should be as current as possible. To some extent, of course, the recency of the information you use will depend on your subject, but you should try, as best you can, to find information that has been published within the past few years. Then again, you need to be careful because in areas such as computer technology or medicine, information a few years old is probably already outdated. If you are providing readers with an historical context, then using a book published 20 or more years ago probably will be fine. What's important is that you think about the publication date as you evaluate a source.

One of your primary goals in doing research is to find the best information you can to support what you have to say in your paper. If you find the same information in a number of sources, chances are the information is good. Information that is **repetitive** tends to be more accurate than information that exists in only one source (this is not to say that information found in just one source is not accurate, though you need to be careful). As you do your research and find articles, be leery of information that doesn't seem to be representative of the information you are finding elsewhere.



There are no shortcuts to doing quality research. Research tends to be laborious, but if you want to save some time, the best advice is to do the research the right way the first time through. And in this case, it means scrutinizing the sources you find and making sure they pass the tests of being **reliable**, **recent**, and **repetitive**.

Thanks everyone--happy writing!

