Evaluating Sources

Before deciding to use a source, or how to use it, evaluate it to decide how reliable it is and what purposes it is useful for.

Some questions to consider:

- Who is the author? What information do you have about their credentials to write on the subject, or their reputation? Some books and articles will have an “about the author” item near the beginning or end; if not, see what you can learn on the internet.

- What is the reputation of the publisher (for books) or the periodical (for articles)? For periodicals, the Ulrich’s database available through the library can provide useful information.

- What is the audience of the source? Is it a general/popular source, or a scholarly/professional one? Whenever possible, include some professional sources in the mix of your sources for a paper, especially for information about your topic.

- How close is the source to the original research that produced the information? (Primary/secondary distinction). Sources reporting primary research, when available and not too technical, are the best sources to use. Secondary (indirect) sources can be an adequate substitute if they are otherwise reliable, but may be most useful in pointing you to a primary source.

- How old is the source? And how much does that matter for your topic?

- What is the purpose of the source? Is it informative—and therefore a good source of information if it is reliable—or is it persuasive?

Persuasive writing is very useful as an example of how a position is argued. It lets you know what concerns people with that position may have and may bring up aspects of the issue that other sources don’t. It can also be useful as a source of information, but it is likely to be selective and could possibly distort information or misrepresent opposing viewpoints, and therefore needs to be balanced with, and checked against, sources with differing viewpoints.

- If it is an argument, how good a case does it make? You can’t responsibly support a point you want to make with a conclusion someone else made, unless that conclusion is a sound one. How well does it support its generalizations? Is there specific information and logic, or are claims made without support? Does it assume a variety of views in its audience, or is it “preaching to the choir”?