Critically Evaluating Sources
Areas to consider

- Authority of the author
- Objectivity of the author
- Quality of the work
- Background of the publisher
- Currency of the work
- Relevancy of the work
Questions to ask

To evaluate authority
Who is the author?

- Common places to find the name of the author:
  - Title page (Books and reports)
  - Top of the first page (articles and book chapters)
  - End of the article (encyclopedias)
What are the author’s credentials?

What to look for:
- Relevant university degree
  - Do they have a degree in the discipline you are researching?
- Institutional affiliation
  - Where does he or she work?
- Relevant field or employment experience
- Past writings

Where can you find this information?
- Examine the item for information about the author
- Search the web for the author’s homepage
- Search the databases or library’s catalog for other sources by the author
What is the author’s reputation among his/her peers?

What to look for:
- Have they been cited by other works?
- Were they mentioned in your textbook or by your professor?

Where to look:
- Search [Google Scholar](https://scholar.google.com) and use the “cited by…” link.
- If you find an article in JSTOR you can see other articles that are in JSTOR that cite the article in the “Summary” section.
Who is the publisher?

Questions to ask:
- Commercial, trade, institutional, other?
- Basic values or goals?
- Specialization?

Where to look:
- Examine the publisher’s website
Questions to ask

To evaluate objectivity
Does the author state the goals of the publication?

**Questions to ask:**
- Is the goal to inform, explain, or advocate?
- Are they selling a service?
- Does the publication serve as a soapbox?

**Where to look:**
- Skim the foreword, preface, abstract and/or introduction of the work
Does the author exhibit a bias?

Questions to ask:
- Does the author acknowledge their bias?
- Are both sides of a controversial issue presented?

Where to look:
- Skim the abstract or introduction, and conclusion
- Examine the work for:
  - Inflammatory language
  - Images or graphics to persuade you to the author’s point of view
  - Arguments or supporting facts
  - A bibliography that does or does not include multiple points of view
Does the information appear to be valid and well researched?

**Questions to ask:**
- Are arguments supported by evidence?
- Are opposing viewpoints addressed?
- Are authoritative sources cited?

**Where to look:**
- Verify facts
- Examine cited sources for authority and objectivity

**Triangulation:** If three sources, that don’t cite each other, say the same thing, it is probably correct.
Questions to ask

To evaluate quality
Is the information well organized?

What to look for:
- Logical structure
- Main points clearly presented
- Text flows well
- Argument is not repetitive

Where to look:
- Skim the text
- Look through the table of contents
Did the author use proper grammar?

- Check for spelling and grammar errors
Questions to ask

To evaluate for currency
When was it published?

- Look at the copyright date
- Usually look for sources from within the last 10 years
- Does the topic require more current information?
  - Science, medicine, current events
  - For these topics only use sources from the last 1-3 years, unless you are looking at a historical perspective
- Has the source been updated? (books)
  - Search the library catalog for the book and click on the “other editions” link
Questions to ask

To evaluate relevance
Is the content appropriate for your research topic?

- Is the source scholarly or popular?
- Can you identify the format (e.g., book, article, website, etc.)
- Is the content primary, secondary, or bibliographic?