

A guide to information credibility in a “post-truth” world



Evaluating your sources

Understanding how to assess the credibility of the information you come across in your study and research is essential. More information is at our fingertips than ever before (IBM, 2012) and the amount of information makes it even harder to determine which information can be trusted. As the terms ‘post truth’, ‘fake news’, and ‘alternative facts’ become increasingly prevalent in social discourse and the public sphere it’s essential that you develop the skills to critically evaluate information yourself.

The term ‘credible’ refers to information that is not just believable but information that is convincingly true, accurate and reputable (OED Online, 2016)

Why use credible sources?

Using credible sources to back up your argument in your research gives your writing credibility. High quality resources supporting your arguments are more likely to translate into better results for your assignments. Conversely, poor quality references will be noticed and are likely to adversely affect your results.

What are scholarly and non-scholarly sources?

Scholarly information usually refers to information that you find from your Library’s resources. In general, scholarly works are written by experts in the field and are vetted for accuracy and scientific rigour via accepted scholarly publishing standards such as [peer review](#) (for journals and conferences) or editorial processes in the case of books (Lavoie et.al., 2014). A level of credibility is assumed when an item is found within the Library. However even if your evidence is sourced from the Library, the quality of the information itself should be assessed critically.



Non-scholarly sources usually refers to information that you find freely available on the Internet. Content on the web can be written by anyone, for any purpose, without any expectation of trustworthiness or truthfulness. You probably already have a certain level of scrutiny when looking at these types of resources but it is important to be able to critically appraise your evidence and to use the appropriate information for the right context.

How to assess the credibility of your sources?

Whether you have sourced your evidence from the Library or the web, consider these questions when assessing the credibility of the evidence. The criteria below have been adapted from the C.R.A.A.P (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose) Test developed by the Meriam Library, California State University (2010).



Where does your content come from?

- Is it scholarly?
- Is the information supported by evidence?
- Is that evidence referenced by the source?
- Has the content been peer-reviewed or edited by a publisher?
- Can the information be verified by other literature on the same topic?
- Is the tone objective and impartial?
- Is it free from obvious errors such as spelling or grammar?
- Is it written by a scholar with expertise in the field?



If the answer to these questions is yes, it is likely that this is a credible source. Good work!
If the answer to any of these questions is no or I don't know, continue on through the questions below.

Who is the author and what are their credentials?

- Is the author qualified to write on the topic?
- Are their credentials visible?
- Is the author affiliated with a recognised research institution?



The qualifications of an author and their affiliation with a recognised University or research institution is evidence that the author is knowledgeable in the field and has the expertise to contribute to the scholarly discourse on a topic. You should be wary if the source is written by an author who is not an authority on a subject area or if their qualifications and affiliations are not transparent.

What is the purpose of the work and is it biased?

- Why has this work been written?
- Who is the audience and what is the message?
- Is it sponsored? Has a group or company paid the author to make these claims? Consider, for instance, lobby groups, special interest groups, corporate entities etc.
- Is it biased? Is the author affected by political, social, economic, environmental, religious, cultural, personal or any other bias?

Bias can be present in scholarly and non-scholarly material and is often not immediately obvious. When assessing bias it is important to take note of the tone of the writing (is it selling you something, informing, persuading etc.) and whether the information is supported by evidence that can be verified independently of the source.

What kind of information do you need?

- Do you require the most up to date research?
- Do you want an overview of the body of knowledge of the field?
- Do you need an historical perspective?



Different fields of research require different evidence to support their arguments. Many fields require the most up-to-date material, in which case the most recently published peer reviewed work will be most suitable for your needs. However, other types of research require different types of information. For example, a literature review evaluates all of the literature related to a field of study and will therefore require the researcher to identify all the research published on a topic, or more likely, to access textbooks and journal articles that summarise the body of knowledge in question. When searching for credible sources, think about whether the currency of the research is appropriate for your needs.

For the purposes of writing essays and reports in first year, you may find some peer-reviewed journal articles useful. It is just as likely, however, that you will find the information you seek from scholarly textbooks and synopses available from *reliable* sources on the web.

Internet Research

The internet contains the widest variety of information available to a researcher, allowing access to information that may be very useful, but may also be unreliable. For your research it is worth considering the following domain-name hierarchy as a general guide to the reliability of information:

Education	.edu
Academic	.ac
Government	.gov
Organisation	.org
Commercial	.com
Network	.net



Although picking sources from the top of this list is no guarantee of the credibility of evidence you find, doing so will generally guide you to those sources published by experts or by established institutions who are interested in reliable public knowledge. The farther down this hierarchy a source sits, the more likely it is to be influenced by private or commercial bias.

A note on Wikipedia

While you certainly would not cite a Wikipedia article as a credible source in your essay, Wikipedia can be a great place to start to get an understanding of a topic. It may also lead you to relevant, high quality resources. Try looking at the references of a Wikipedia page (at the bottom of each Wikipedia page) and assess the quality of the references you find. Many Wikipedia entries will cite scholarly sources (including books and journal articles) in their references. You can use FindIt@Flinders to locate these references, which if appropriate, can then be cited in your essay.

Is the content appropriate for your needs?

- Do you need primary material? What kind and where can it be found? Archives, museums etc.
- Perhaps you are looking for popular opinions on a topic. News, Twitter or Facebook might be useful.
- Do you need to back up your claims with evidence? If so, scholarly resources are required.

When selecting credible sources, think about what type of content is relevant for your needs. Primary sources can include tweets, Facebook posts, news articles, archived materials, and museum specimens among other things. It may be appropriate to reference a primary source for your research but be sure you have independent evidence to back up or refute the claims.

Being able to assess the credibility of a source is a skill that you will develop over time as you become more familiar with scholarly, academic material.

If you're completely lost on how to find good resources for your assignments try starting out by looking at the references of the readings provided by your topic coordinator, tutor or lecturer on your topic. Check out our Library help guides for developing your [search strategies](#) or simply visit one of the Information Desks at any branch for individual support.

Images

Macrovector 2016, *Simple Education Icons*, vector, viewed 22 February 2017, <http://www.freepik.com/free-vector/simple-education-icons_1012551.htm>.

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