

Evaluating Print Sources

What this handout is about

This handout will discuss strategies to evaluate secondary printed sources—books, journal articles, magazines, etc.—based on three criteria: objectivity, authority, and applicability to your particular assignment. Printed sources, whether primary or secondary, provide the evidence for most of the academic essays you will write in college. Non-print sources, such as webpages, works of art (performance and fine), and interviews often provide significant source material for analysis but are not covered in this handout.

Introduction

At some point in your college career, you will be asked to write a research paper. While you may associate research papers with history or political science classes, the study of most disciplines involves the collection and interpretation of data with the intent of making and supporting an argument. To do this, you must use some printed texts, whether they are primary documents or secondary sources that analyze primary sources.

If you have never written a research paper at the college level, the process may appear daunting. The first step, of course, is to develop a topic that investigates a problem important to your discipline. For this, talk to your instructor or the library Reference staff and check out our handouts on understanding assignments, constructing thesis statements, and making arguments in academic writing.

So you come up with a good idea and head to the library to begin research. UNC's Davis Library contains over five million books and journals. Which ones are useful to your study? What if the information they present is false, outdated, or biased to the point of inaccuracy? How can you tell? This handout will help answer these questions.

Researchers approach an unfamiliar source and ask questions of it with the intention of discovering clues that will tell them if they can trust the source and if it can add anything to the argument. The steps that are outlined below may appear drawn-out and perfunctory to some; each step is outlined in detail so that both novice and advanced researchers can benefit. This will help you approach your sources more carefully and critically.

Primary and secondary sources

This handout will focus on how to evaluate secondary sources, but the critical skills you learn here will help in analyzing primary sources too. Before we can get to secondary sources, we need to differentiate primary from secondary sources. Primary sources come in various shapes and sizes, and often you have to do a little bit of research about the source to make sure you have correctly identified it.

In a nutshell, a primary source was produced at the same time that the events described in the source took place. Sound easy? In most cases it is. Here are some examples and problem areas:

Diaries and letters written by people who were participants in the actions they describe are easy to classify as primary sources, but what about memoirs or autobiographies? These are usually written well after the events took place and often will tell you more about the period in which they were written than about the period they describe.

What about newspapers? The author of an article presents an interpretation, but if the article reports current events, it is primary. If the article reports past events, it is secondary. Keep in mind that an article about a past event can present valuable primary evidence concerning the author's context.

What about fiction? If you are studying the novel or poem for its own sake, it is a primary source. If you are using the novel or poem as evidence—a historical novel, for example—it is a secondary source. In the same vein, a 19th-century history textbook can be considered a primary source if you are studying how the work was influenced by the period in which it was written or how it fits into a continuum of historical analysis (that is called historiography).

Check out this table to help differentiate primary and secondary sources.

Primary	Secondary
The Tempest by William Shakespeare	An article that analyzes the motif of the 'savage other' in The Tempest.
The Diary of Anne Frank	A book about the Holocaust
The Declaration of Independence	A biography of Thomas Jefferson
Population statistics on Ethiopia from The World Factbook	An article titled "The impact of population growth on infant mortality in Ethiopia."

Secondary sources will inform most of your writing in college. You will often be asked to research your topic using primary sources, but secondary sources will tell you which primary sources you should use and will help you interpret those primary sources. To use them well, however, you need to think critically about them.

There are two parts of a source that you need to analyze: the text itself and the argument within the text.

Evaluating the text

You evaluate a text to determine the objectivity of the author and the credibility of the work. Do not assume that your sole motive or goal is to eliminate sources. While this may be a consequence of your analysis, your goal should be to understand the context of the work so you can assess how it can inform your argument. To do this, you must analyze the text according to three criteria: the author, the publisher, and the date of publication.

Author

Remember back at the beginning of this handout I wrote that critically analyzing sources is all about asking questions? Well, here is where you show off that skill. The next time you pick up a book in the library, look at the author's name. Have you heard of her? Do you know if he is cited in other books on the subject? Has your instructor mentioned the author's name? Is she affiliated with a university (which may or may not add to her authority)? Does the author acknowledge an organizational affiliation? The acknowledgements and preface are good places to get the answers to most of these questions.

Publisher

The questions you will ask about the publisher are similar to those asked about the author. Look in the first few pages of the book for the copyright and publisher information. Did a university press—for example, UNC Press, UT Press—publish the text? Did a popular press—Jones and Bartlett, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich—publish it? You can be relatively sure that if a university press published the book, it has been held to a high academic standard. Popular presses differ in their standards. You may have to look at other aspects of the book (see below for tips on identifying tone and audience) or look at other books produced by the same publisher to judge the credibility of the text. Remember, you are not looking for ways to exclude works. Rather, you are trying to understand the context in which the book was written so you can better analyze its content.

Date of Publication

If you are researching a current issue, it stands to reason that you want the most up-to-date sources you can find. If your topic is not so current, it is often acceptable to go back ten or even twenty years for your sources. If there is a more recent book on the same topic, make sure that you look at it. Maybe the author found new evidence that drastically alters the argument of the first book. The age of a work can be easy to determine, but it is sometimes tricky. The page that has all the publisher's information has a copyright date. Has the work been translated? If so, that date is probably the date of the translation. Is there more than one date listed on the page? In that case, you probably have a newer edition. If so, the author wrote most of the book at the time of the first date of publication, although new information may have been added since then.

Objectivity

After analyzing the text, you may find some bias. That does not mean you should discard it. Perhaps the author thanks an anti-homosexual religious organization for funding his research on same-sex marriages. You may be tempted to toss the book aside because you feel that a biased work will not provide the 'facts.' But you may be missing out on some good evidence. No secondary work is going to give you the 'facts.' Secondary sources provide interpretations of primary data. Every interpretation is influenced by the author's context. Find out where the author is coming from and use the evidence accordingly. For example, the book about same-sex marriages funded by the Southern Baptist Convention may provide a clear presentation of the conservative side of the issue. Paired with a book that provides a liberal interpretation, the conservative book may provide valuable information about the various positions within the discussion.

Evaluating an argument

Analyzing the author, publisher, and age of the text provides a good place to start your analysis. You should not stop there, however. You have to move beyond the appraisal of the text and begin to analyze the content. To do this, you can use the same technique of asking questions and searching for responses.

Applicability

Is the work applicable to your study? The first place to look for answers is the table of contents. A book can have a great title but then can be full of tangential ideas or take an approach that simply may not add to your study. The next place to check out is the index. The index is a wonderful resource for researchers. You can use it to quickly jump to particular passages if your topic is well defined. More often, you'll scan the index to get a feel for the authority and scope of the text. Often you can learn most of what a book can tell you by reading the preface and the introduction and scanning the table of contents and index.

Argument

Analyzing the argument gets to the heart of a critical approach to your sources. **While this task may seem daunting at first, here are some tips and techniques you can learn to make it a lot easier:**

- Is the information supported by evidence? Take a good look at the footnotes or endnotes. What kinds of sources did the author use? Does the bibliography mention the important books in the field?
- What is the major claim or thesis of the book or article? Is it clear what the author is trying to prove?
- What are the primary assumptions on which the author bases the argument's main claim? Do you agree with those assumptions? Is the author taking too much liberty in making those assumptions?
- Check out the Book Review Index in the Reference section of the library. Read what other scholars have written about this book. Are the reviews generally positive? Do they consider the book useful or important to the field? This is not considered cheating. On the contrary, it will enable you to read the book with your eyes open, so to speak.

Audience

An analysis of the audience can tell you a lot about how much authority a book or article can claim. Most of what you uncovered in your analysis of the text will inform your judgment of the intended audience. You can find out more by looking at how the book is written and what type of format it is written in. Is the work full of technical terms or graphs? Then the audience may be academic. Is the language very simple with lots of pictures? Then the audience may be a younger crowd, or the book may be intended for light reading. If you are reading a newspaper or magazine, look at the advertisements. Who does the publisher hope will read the source? An advertisement for Lexus automobiles or Johnny Walker Red scotch in "Newsweek" may indicate a wealthy, educated (and possibly male) audience. An advertisement in "People" for Tommy Hilfiger or Pepsi may indicate a different audience.

Tone

The tone of a book is how the author represents himself or herself through language. Strong and impassioned language may indicate to you that the author is too emotionally connected to the work to provide an objective analysis. Most academic authors try to appear impartial in their writing by always writing in the third person and staying away from loaded adjectives. **Here are some questions you can ask about the author's tone:**

- Does the author's language seem impartial to you? Are wild claims made? Is a lot of emotional language used?
- Does the author remain focused on the argument? Does he or she jump from point to point without completing any thoughts?
- Does the author seem objective? Does the information appear to be propaganda to you? Is a specific agenda put forth through the selection of data or the manipulation of evidence? Remember, finding a bias does not necessarily mean you should discard the book. Take it in stride and use it accordingly.

Authority

Answers to all the questions posed above will help you determine whether you can accept a source as an authority. Can you trust it? What can you trust about it? There is no easy way to answer that question, but by carefully approaching both the text and the argument you can feel more confident about the source.

Following the trail

It may happen that you come up with a topic and go to the library to find sources. You sit down with ten books that you gleaned from a keyword search on the library's online catalog. You put all ten books through the critical analysis steps outlined above, and only one fits all your criteria. What do you do now? Go back to the library catalog? Browse the shelves near where you found the first ten? Those methods may work, but a quicker way is to follow the trail of sources in the one book you have decided to use. Look at the footnotes and bibliography. Note titles that the author relies on or refers to as pillars of the discipline. Then look up those book or articles in the library catalog and begin the critical analysis process all over again. This time, however, you know what one author thinks about the book, so it already has achieved a level of authority or importance. Following the trail from one book or article to others can lead to an understanding of the entire structure of the literature on a particular topic.

Apply what you've learned

Now that you know the key terms and what questions to ask, put your newfound knowledge to the test. **What questions would you ask of this handout?**

- Is the author an authority?
- Is the author biased?
- Can I learn anything from this handout?

How would you go about finding out the answers to these questions? For the first question, go to the UNC Writing Center Homepage. There you will find out who funds the Writing Center and who works there. The answer to the second question is yes, I do have biases, although I am probably not aware of all of them. Do they affect what I write? Of course. Is that necessarily bad? Of course not. The answer to the third question is more difficult.

There is no table of contents because this is a short work, but the bold section breaks and bulleted lists should help you scan the document for applicability. Everyone approaches a learning situation from a different angle, and what is useful to one person might not be for the next. That is an assessment you must make from your own perspective.

Don't forget to follow the trail of this handout to continue thinking about these ideas: check out the list below.

Works consulted

We consulted these works while writing the original version of this handout. This is not a comprehensive list of resources on the handout's topic, and we encourage you to do your own research to find the latest publications on this topic. Please do not use this list as a model for the format of your own reference list, as it may not match the citation style you are using. For guidance on formatting citations, please see the UNC Libraries citation tutorial.

Booth, Wayne C., et al. *The Craft of Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Ede, Lisa. *Work in Progress: A Guide to Academic Writing and Revising*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2001.

<http://www.library.cornell.edu/okuref/research/skill26.htm>

http://www.lib.calpoly.edu/infocomp/modules/05_evaluate/index.html

<http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/library/infosrv/lue/evalu.html>

[Thanks to Emily Jackson-Sanborn of Duke University's Perkins Library Reference Department for the web references.]



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License.

You may reproduce it for non-commercial use if you use the entire handout (just click print) and attribute the source: The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

If you enjoy using our handouts, we appreciate contributions of acknowledgement.

[Make a Gift](#)