

Finding Credible Sources



Credible sources are sources of information that we can “trust” in terms of their truthfulness, accuracy, and objectivity. Research writing, or any writing done for academic purposes, requires the use of credible sources to support the central and supporting ideas of the composition. The challenge, however, is in determining which sources of information are credible and which ones are not. The following are some general guidelines to keep in mind when evaluating the “credibility” of sources of information:

Sources Generally Accepted as Credible

Some sources of information are automatically considered acceptable for academic research. These include:

Academic Books, i.e.:

- Original works written by experts or academic scholars based on extensive research
- Generally containing in-text references to other sources of information
- Often published by an academic press or university press

Academic Articles, i.e.:

- Reports focusing on original research
- Generally contain in-text references to other sources of information
- Often published by professional, academic, or scientific journals
- Often “peer reviewed”, i.e. checked by other academic experts for quality

Other sources generally accepted as being credible include:

- Academic social media including blogs/vlogs
- Campus lectures/presentations
- Professional interviews
- Academic encyclopedias (e.g.; Encyclopedia of Anthropology)
- Government publications and websites (often with **.gov** in their domain names)
- Non-governmental organization (NGO) publications and websites (often with **.org** in their domain names); especially international organizations such as UNICEF, UNESCO, World Health Organization, etc.
- Science magazines
- Science/social science-focused documentaries
- Symposia such as TED Talks

Finding Credible Sources Online

The vast amount of material published on the web can make it difficult to locate credible information. There are, however, websites devoted to helping research writers locate credible sources of data and information.

Academic Journal Databases

These are basically websites that publish academic articles. Some well-known databases include:

- **SAGE Journals** (online.sagepub.com/)
- **ProQuest** (www.proquest.com)
- **EBSCOhost Online** (www.ebscohost.com)

NOTE: While these databases are excellent sources of “scholarly material” (i.e. material created by professors and academic researchers) they require a paid subscription or academic program enrollment to access the articles they provide.

Specialized Websites/Search Engines

Some websites are designed to provide researchers with free access to credible sources of information. The following are some notable examples:

- **Google Scholar** (scholar.google.com/)
This is a special extension of the Google search engine which focuses on scholarly material that can be used for academic research/writing purposes.
- **Academic Journals** (academicjournals.org/) This website provides links to peer-reviewed, open-access journals covering the arts and humanities, engineering, medical science, social sciences, biological sciences, physical sciences and agricultural sciences.
- **CQ Researcher** (library.cqpress.com/) This website provides articles focusing on current events and issues that can be used for academic research purposes
- **DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals)** (doaj.org/)
The DOAJ provides links to a comprehensive list of open-access scientific and scholarly journals in a number of fields.
- **F1000Research** (f1000research.com/)
F1000Research publishes articles, posters and slides reporting basic scientific and clinical research in the fields of life sciences and medicine.
- **JURN** (jurn.org/) JURN provides academic researchers with access to free academic articles and books in the fields of arts and humanities, science, biomedicine, business and law.
- **OMICS International** (omicsonline.org/)
OMICS International provides links to open-access publications in all aspects of science, engineering, management and technology.

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Evaluating Credibility

Sometimes researchers have to make their own determination of source credibility. To do this, several key factors need to be considered and evaluated. The following questions can be used as criteria for making that assessment.

1. **Who is the author of the source?** More importantly, is the author *an expert* on the subject you are researching?

- People with advanced academic degrees i.e. Master's or PhD are generally accepted as experts in their particular field.
- People with extensive professional experience in a field may also be considered as legitimate sources of information.

When reviewing a source, check for the author's name as well as any additional information about them, i.e. a biography or "About the author" section (often included at the end of books and articles).

- **When just a name is provided**, you will have to do some additional research to find out more about the author, the easiest option being Google or another search engine. The important point is to find out whether or not they qualify as an expert or a legitimate source of information.
- **If no name is given as the author** of the work, your decision to use the information will have to be based on other factors such as the publisher of the website (see front page).

2. **Is the source of information objective, or is it biased in some way?**

A "biased" source of information is one that relies heavily on one point of view or opinion without looking at opposing viewpoints; or that has been created for the purpose of promoting a specific product or organization (i.e. promotional advertisements disguised as articles); or for the purpose of advocating a particular idea (political, religious, etc.).

While this type of material may be used in research as a source of background knowledge, it cannot be used to support an academic thesis.

Credible sources of information are non-biased, and provide ideas and arguments that are based on facts and research, rather than opinion and ulterior motives.

3. **When was the material written?**

The date of publication is also an important factor in determining the credibility of a source.

Changes and advancements in various fields mean that information related to those fields quickly becomes outdated. For example, an article on computer technology written in 2010 is

probably outdated as computer technology changes very quickly. Similarly, statistical information related to any number of areas can change rapidly. Unless you are researching and/or comparing changes over time, it is important to find the most recent sources.

On the other hand, for some subject areas the date of publication is not really important. For example, an article or book analyzing the works of Shakespeare written in 1960 by a Professor of English Literature is probably still a credible source of information. As a researcher you will have to use your own judgement in such cases.

Locating the date of publication for webpages and online articles can sometimes be challenging. If the date is not given, you can check the "last updated" date of the webpage (usually given at the bottom of the page). Unfortunately this only gives the date of the page, not necessarily the date when the articles or information on the page were created, which may require more research.

4. **Does the material contain "additional documentation"?**

Academic books and articles generally contain *proof of research*, i.e. in-text referencing and citation and a list of sources used for research (often labeled "references" or "works cited"), usually located at the end of the paper. These things show that the writer based their article and thesis on research, not just their own ideas or opinions, which adds to the article's overall credibility.

Unfortunately, just because an essay contains such elements does not guarantee its credibility. In many cases the author, purpose, and date of the article are the most important considerations.

The Wikipedia Problem

Wikipedia has become the go-to source for quick information; and while it does provide a lot of useful information that can guide our research, most professors and academic programs will not accept Wikipedia articles as legitimate, i.e. credible sources of information to be used in research writing. This is because the nature of an online "wiki" allows contributions from non-experts which may be biased or based on opinion rather than fact.

However, most Wikipedia articles contain a list of references at the bottom of the page. These references often contain credible sources (sometimes with links to those sources) that can be located elsewhere and used in our research writing projects.