

Information Skills for Language and Linguistic Science

Worksheet 5: Evaluating Information

Critical thinking is an important part of the research process. You need to be able to critically evaluate the information resources that you find before you decide to use them to support your academic work.

Richardson and McBryde-Wilding (2009, p.46)¹ state that:

“All of your course-related information gathering should be guided by critical reading (or listening) as well as by critical thinking, rather than unquestioning acceptance of what you are told... If you are to identify bias and distinguish between fact and opinion you must be critical, that is, you must make judgements about the reliability of your information sources.”

With so many resources available to you, both print and electronic, it is essential to develop a list of criteria that will enable you to evaluate and compare different sources of information. This list should be structured and meaningful but flexible enough to cover a range of different types of resources.

Academic books and scholarly articles have generally been through a rigorous peer-reviewed evaluative process before they are published, so a lot of the initial evaluation has been done for you, but it is still important to examine whether these sources are suitable for your specific research purposes.

Cornell University has an excellent webpage for critically analysing information sources:

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



Cornell University's criterion for **evaluating books** includes:

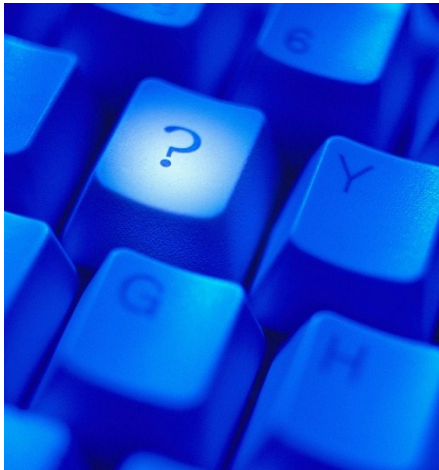
1. **Author:** who is the author and what are their credentials?
2. **Date of publication:** when was the resource published and is it out-of-date for your own research needs?
3. **Edition or revision:** is it a first-edition or has it subsequently been revised by the author?
4. **Publisher:** if it is a university publisher, then the work will likely be of academic standard.
5. **Title of journal:** is the journal scholarly or professional?
6. **Audience:** who is the intended audience of this work?
7. **Objective reasoning:** is the information covered fact, opinion or propaganda?
8. **Coverage:** you need to make sure that you read widely so that you have a variety of viewpoints on a particular topic.

¹ Richardson, L., & McBryde-Wilding, H. (2009). *Information skills for education students*. Exeter: Learning Matters.

Evaluating webpages

Given the scale of the Internet and the fact that nearly any search on a search engine such as Google generates thousands, if not millions, of hits, it is very important to carefully evaluate websites before you use them in your scholarly research.

Task: Test the following criteria against a specific website that you use regularly:



1. **Accuracy:** can you rely on the information provided on the website?
2. **Authority:** who has written the webpages and do they have the necessary knowledge or qualifications to do so?
3. **Currency:** are the pages up-to-date and regularly maintained?
4. **Objectivity:** Is there any inherent bias in the pages that you need to be aware of?
5. **Coverage:** Does the website provide enough information or will you need to look at a range of websites?

The Internet Detective is an excellent, free online tutorial which teaches you how to evaluate web resources and manage your online research: (<http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/detective/>).



“Sure, you use the Internet all the time,
but you need to **wise up to the web** when you use it for
your university or college work.”

If you have any doubts about whether or not to use a particular resource, ask your academic tutor or academic liaison librarian.

Once you have selected and evaluated a set of resources, you can then start to compare the resources in terms of key themes, ideas and arguments. This will help inform your own thoughts and conclusions and will demonstrate how well you have reviewed and understood the literature.