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[Getting Started](#)

Evaluating a Bibliographic Citation

[Evaluating Content in the Source](#)

[Evaluating Internet Sources](#)

[Further Resources](#)

Before you read a source or spend time hunting for it, begin by looking at the following information in the citation to evaluate whether it's worth finding or reading.

Author

Credentials

To consider how reputable the author is, ask yourself the following questions:

What is the author's educational background?

What has the author written in the past about this topic?

Why or how is the person considered an expert?

You can check The Library of Congress to see what else the person has written, and *Book Review Index* and *Book Review Digest* may lead you to reviews of other books by this person. Your library may have citation indexes that can also lead you to articles and other shorter pieces. For biographical information, read *Who's Who in America* or the *Biography Index*. There may also be information in the publication such as previous writings, awards, and notes about the author. Your goal is to get some sense of who this person is and why it's worth reading what that person wrote.

References

Did a teacher or librarian or some other person who is knowledgeable about the topic mention this person?

Did you see the name listed in other sources?

When someone is an authority, you may find other references to this person. That is not a guarantee that the person is reputable, but it does indicate a reason to think the person is worth reading. If you are seeking viewpoints on a subject, it is useful to read this person's writing because you should be aware of various views and perspectives on many sides of an issue.

Institution

What organization, institution, or company is the person associated with?

What are the goals of the institution or organization?

Does it monitor what's published? How rigorous is that review process?

Might this group be biased in some way? That is, are they trying to sell you something or convince you to accept their view? Do they do disinterested research? (Don't be convinced by the name of the organization because some disguise their agenda by selecting a name that does not indicate what their real goals are.)

Timeliness

When was the source published? (For Web sites, see if there's a "last revised" date at the bottom.)

Is that date current enough to be useful, or might there be out-dated material?

Is the source a revision of an earlier version? If so, it is not only likely to be more current but also something that is valuable enough to revise. Check a library catalogue or *Books in Print* to see which is the latest edition.

Publisher/Producer

Who produced or published the material?

Is the publisher reputable? For example, a university press or a government agency is likely to be a reputable source that reviews what it publishes. That helps to ensure some quality control over the material.

Is the group recognized in the field as being an authority?

Is the publisher likely to be an appropriate one for this kind of information? Or might the publisher or group have a particular bias on this topic? (For example, if you are looking at a Web site for a particular candidate for office, is the site sponsored by people trying to elect that person or opponents of that candidate?)

Is there any sort of review process or fact checking? (If a pharmaceutical company publishes data on a new drug it is developing, has there been outside review of the data?)

Audience

Can you tell from the title (and perhaps the publisher) who the intended audience is?

Is there a point of view being promoted? Sometimes, sources of information are really infomercials promoting the cause or product or bias of a particular group.

Might the material be too scholarly, too specialized, or too popular to be useful to you? (A three-volume study on gene splitting may be more than you need for a five-page paper on a particular genetically transmitted disease. But a half-page article on a visit to Antarctica won't tell you much about research into ozone depletion going on there.)

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