



Author Credibility

This handout expands the tips provided on our “Evaluating Sources” handout that are related to deciding if authors are “reputable” or “credible.”

Checklist for investigating author credibility

- Examine the item for information about the author.
- Look in biographical sources, like *Current Biography*, *Cambridge Dictionary of Scientists*, *Macmillan Profiles*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, or similar biographical books in our collection.
- Look for reviews of the source and its author in sources like *Book Review Digest*, *Magazines for Libraries*, *Booklist*, *Library Journal*, or *Internet Scout Report*. Ask library faculty for help with these.
- Look in directories, like the *National Faculty Directory*, *World of Learning*, or books in the *Who's Who* series.
- Search indexes for articles in peer-reviewed journals written by this author.
- Search the web for information about this author.

Questions below point to the **whos**, **whats**, **wheres** and **whys** of sources... What does this source say? Who says it? Why do they say it? What is their evidence? Where did they find the information? Why should you believe it? Is it known to be true? Is it the *whole* truth? Who else supports it?

Credibility

- Is there biographical or professional information about the authors? What experience do the authors have with this subject: do they have life experience in this subject, do they hold degrees in related disciplines, are they working in related professions? When researching asthma, do you want information written by someone who has asthma or a health care worker without asthma? Will any health care worker do, or do you want an expert? Will any M.D. specializing in lung disorders do, or do you want info coming only from a member of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology? In reviewing these last three questions, you can see that “expert” can mean any number of things.
- What affiliations do the authors have with related professional or educational organizations? Is this important for your research?
- Is this source related to others you've found? Have other sources mentioned this author or this source? Does the source include a forward or reviews by experts in this field?
- How does this source compare to others on this topic? Does it agree or disagree with conventional wisdom, popular opinion, established scholarship, professional practice, etc.?
- Is a bibliography or works cited list included? If so, are the works reputable and appropriate for this subject? If not, do the authors reveal where they found their information?
- Who is the publisher: a university, a government organization, a commercial venture, a non-profit organization, a private entity, or a publishing company? Does this indicate any bias or conflict of interest?

Question Credibility When:

- There is no author information.
- There is no bibliography or Works Cited list, so information can't be verified.
- Information about and reviews of this source are negative or can't be found.

In **addition** to the evaluation issues for other resources, keep the following in mind when evaluating **Internet** resources.

- Is there contact information for the authors? (If not, read the section on the back of this handout about identifying web page authors.)
- What is the domain for this document? Beware of misleading URLs (Compare www.pierce.com to www.pierce.ctc.edu ; www.harvard.com to www.harvard.edu ; and www.mayo.edu to www.mayo.com.) For more information about domains, read our handout about URLs.
- Is the organization that hosts this information known and respected? Is there a conflict of interest in them presenting this information? Will they benefit from you agreeing with their point of view? For example, how suspicious would you be if you found an article titled “Eating Garlic Makes You Live Longer” on the web site of a garlic grower? How about if it were on the American Medical Association web site? What if it were on a garlic lover's web site?

Question Credibility When:

- Authors aren't identified or contact information is missing.
- Subjectivity and conflicts of interest are evident.

Content (accuracy, scope, suitability, relevance)

Some content-related issues can give you clues about authors' reputations.

- What is the purpose of the source: to provide new information, direct you to additional information, explain a concept, persuade you?
- What point of view, bias, or subjectivity is evident? Is the information presented as fact, opinion, or both? How does this impact the value of this source for your project?

In **addition** to the evaluation issues for other resources, keep the following in mind when evaluating **Internet** resources.

- Are the links to outside resources relevant and current? What are the criteria for adding links from this site? Can *any* site request a link?
- Do other reliable sites link to this one? You can generate a list of web sites that link to it by doing a "power search" at <www.go.com>. Ask at the Reference Desk for help with this.
- Is there advertising on the site? Do the ads reveal any bias?
- Are there errors of fact, spelling, grammar or other indications of carelessness?

Question Content When:

- Presents one-sided view that doesn't acknowledge or respond to opposing views.
- Outdated information or sources are used when timeliness matters.
- Sweeping language and overclaims (overuse of words like *always*, *never*, *every*).
- Claims & assertions are vague.
- Attempts to pull you in emotionally rather than intellectually. Uses anger or empathy instead of intellect.
- On web pages, links to outside sources are outdated.
- Web pages look flashy but offer little content.

Identifying web page authors

When you're having trouble figuring out who wrote a certain web page, try these tricks:

- Look on the web page for names of people who call themselves owners, creators, or writers. (NOTE: "webmaster" and "maintained by" do not indicate authors.)
- Sometimes authors aren't identified by title, but they do provide their name or e-mail address in notes like (if the author is Kari Kells): "© Kari Kells," "Kari Kells, 1/20/04," or something similar.
- If you don't see any authors' names, but you do see e-mail addresses, send them a quick note telling them you're using their info in a paper (or speech) and that you need their names for your works cited page.
- If you don't see an obvious name on the page, follow links to pages that might lead you to author information. Common useful links say things like: "home," "back," "about me," "contact me," "go to my other pages," and "biography." After getting to that next page, look for information about the author.

When you've tried all the above, but still don't see an author's name, don't give up. Get creative. You may want to review our *Web Addresses (URLs)* handout before doing the following:

- Go one step back in the web address. For example, if the address is <http://www.pierce.ctc.edu/Library/internet/Reference.html>, try backing up to the last slash (/): go to <http://www.pierce.ctc.edu/Library/internet/>. Then look for the info described in the sections above. If you still find nothing, try backing up to the next slash (go to <http://www.pierce.ctc.edu/Library/>) and try again. Continue to do this until you reach the first part, the domain name portion of the address, which is the page's "host."
- Use a search engine to find links to this site from other sites. Maybe one of those mentions the author of this site.
 1. Go to <http://www.google.com/>
 2. Click on "Advanced Search."
 3. Under the section "Page-Specific Search," in the box after "Links: Find pages that link to the page," type in the address you're curious about. For example, see what happens when you type www.pierce.ctc.edu/Library/.
 4. Visit the web pages on the results list to see if any of those pages mention an author of the page you're citing.

For more information...

Critically Analyzing Information Sources <<http://www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/research/skill26.htm>> by Joan Ormondroyd, Michael Engle, and Tony Cosgrave.

Evaluating Internet Sites 101 <<http://169.226.11.130/divs/usered/webeval/>> by Carol Anne Germain and Laura Horn.

Evaluating What You Find <<http://www.wesleyan.edu/libr/tut/rst11.htm>> by Wesleyan University Library staff.

The Web Credibility Project <<http://www.webcredibility.org/>> Stanford Persuasive Technology Lab team members.