

Evaluating Source Materials for Academic Papers

Academic publishing has within it an established system of validating legitimate material. These rankings are important for assessing the accuracy and quality of the data and analysis within the work. Published materials are the building blocks of academic disciplines and so accuracy and legitimacy are important facets to consider.

- **Journals** are peer-reviewed or refereed: before they are accepted for publishing, articles are sent out to academic experts in similar fields to assess the content and contribution of the submission. The editors take the opinions of the reviewers into account when deciding to accept or reject (with or without the option of revising and re-submitting) the article. The reviewers do not know who the author of the article is and their opinions are assumed to be objective and impartial. Journals develop reputations based on the quality of their articles, the rigor of editing, and longevity (newer journals are ranked lower than older journals). At the top of the rankings would be (usually) those published by professional associations (national, then regional) and those from universities and colleges that are themselves highly ranked or have impressive editorial boards (with well known and respected academics as members). Journals are in college libraries and subscription search engines and are rarely found in bookstores.
- **Books** are also reviewed prior to publication but are usually ranked by publisher, awards won, and reviews made public after the book has hit the ads and stores. The larger academic publishers are often ranked higher than the specialty academic publishers and the small academic presses follow. Academic books can usually be visually identified by a substantial bibliography and footnotes (or endnotes). The author's credentials should also be listed.
- **Popular Press**--newspapers, magazines (Time, Newsweek, Psychology Today), and journalistic books, --are less valid as academic sources although they often report the findings of new studies. However, they do not often include information to assess the adequacy of those studies (sample size, methodology, etc.)
- **Internet** sources are recent innovations that have not yet developed an obvious system of evaluation--in fact, some would argue that this is its main strength since it does not censor the expression of any point of view. How long such freedom will continue to exist is a debate for another day.

In terms of evaluating the sites you come across on the Internet--for use in academic papers--consider the following questions (which you should also ask yourself when using conventionally published materials):

- **Who published the material?** (Look at the web site address for the three letters at the end of the url and/or the end of the web page for the author(s))
 - Government source data are *typically* the most accurate primarily because this is the data that is used when making public policy. For federal organizations, the URL ends with ".gov", e.g., the Census Bureau

(www.census.gov), Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.gov), Department of Labor (www.dol.gov).

- University Research Centers are also *typically* reliable as the internet is a popular place to disseminate research results. University websites end in “.edu” although note that the rest of the address is a research center, not an individual’s webpage. See the USC/UCLA Center of Biodemography and Population Health Research Center (www.usc.edu/dept/gero/CBPH/ especially the Data link) for an example.
 - Other Research Centers also publish their findings on the internet-- evaluate them as to their purpose and organizational mission. Well known "think-tanks" are potentially more reliable although one should consider their orientation as some may be politically more liberal or conservative. Consider the biases of RAND, Economic Policy Institute, The National Center for Policy Analysis and The CATO Institute. Check out the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute (<http://www.trpi.org/>).
 - Foundations and other organizations must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Keep in mind that many businesses use the internet for marketing purposes and thus may only post positive information or advertising. These URLs may end in .org or .com although either may be bought by anyone. However, some information may be posted on these sites that can be used as background in a paper, e.g., organizational histories and transcripts of Annual Meetings of the Board of Directors-- see www.benjerry.com for an interesting example.
 - Pages posted by named individuals are the least reliable for academic purposes--even if their web address is through a college or university-- because they often represent that person's perspective alone. If the person is a published author and their web site simply reflects their more conventional published work, the information is more likely to be accurate. If the person is simply expressing themselves, this information is most likely not legitimate for use in an academic paper.
- **Do they cite their sources?** Are the citations of high quality research?
 - Does the site mention other materials, either on-line or conventionally published? Unless the site offers tables of original data that the sponsoring organization gathered (thus they should be governmental, university, or foundation based), there should be some mention made of their source materials.
 - Since academic work always builds on previous work, references to other materials should be there if the article is sufficiently "academic" -- if it is not, do not use it!

Don't assume the validity & legitimacy of information: evaluate it!