How to evaluate sources of information

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Introduction

When you start to work on an assignment question you should already have some ideas about the topic. These ideas will have come from what you have heard and discussed in class, what you have read or watched and what you already knew about the topic. Most of the new information you research for any assignment will come from what you read. All the new information you come across then mixes with what you already know. As a result of this process the views and opinions you started with will either be reinforced or will change.

As you research you will also come across material from a variety of sources which express a variety of views. Sometimes these views will contradict each other. If two people say things that contradict each other can they both be right? How do you know which one is more likely to be right? What criteria can you apply to evaluate this material? How true or how valid is it? Just because someone says something louder and more often than someone else doesn’t necessarily make them right.

In your assignments you want to use the best information you can find. Let’s look at some ways you can decide on which information is worth using and which is not. Not all information carries equal weight. You need to work out which information carries the most weight.

One way to evaluate your sources of information

One place to start in reading critically is to work out how good your source material is. One way to do this is apply a 3Rs test: RRR is it relevant, reliable and recent? If a source of information can get a tick for each of these criteria then there is a strong chance that it will be useful for your assignment. Relevant, reliable and recent are good rules of thumb.
Relevant
For something to be *relevant* it must be fairly closely related to the topic you are researching. The reading list your lecturer has provided for a topic is a good place to start looking for relevant sources. A big part of the selection process has already been done for you since the reading list has been put together because the readings are related to the topic.

Reliable
What does *reliable* mean? In academic writing where something is published is very important. Ask yourself what kind of publication your source is. Is it a *book* or a *chapter* in a book? If so, who is the publisher? Is it an article in an *academic journal*? Is it from Wikipedia? Is it from someone’s blog?

The reason these questions are important is that you need to apply some test of *quality control* to your sources. For example, articles in reputable academic journals will have been what is called *peer reviewed*. This means that before the article is accepted for publication it is sent to (mostly) more than one person who is an expert in the field. They then write a report on whether or not the article should be published. The journal’s editor then uses these reports to decide whether or not to publish the article. A similar process happens with academic books, and the chapters in them, which have been published by well known academic publishers.

The peer review process is a very good indicator that the writer of an article (or chapter) has met a high enough standard in how they have done their research and that their conclusions are based on sound interpretation of evidence.

On the other hand, in a blog or a ‘tweet’ anyone can write anything they like with no quality control at all.

Recent
Another test for a source of information is how recent it is. New research builds on research that has already been done. Therefore articles which have been published more recently are more likely to be closer to the state-of-the-art in their field. This does not mean, however, that just because an article is newer it is better. It has to satisfy the other criteria as well.

Link to Assignment Navigator: Organising information

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