Sources Smackdown: The Five W’s

When doing research, you will encounter a variety of sources, including books, articles and websites. How do you know which ones are right for your information needs? You can use the five W’s as outlined below to help evaluate your sources and determine which ones will make the cut.

Who created this?

- Check the preface, introduction or author information in a book. Look for “About Us” links on websites.
- Verify authors' qualifications with other sources like their other journal articles, institution web pages where they work or encyclopedias.

What is this about?

- Does it have the kind of information you need? Look at the title, abstract, subject headings, table of contents, web address or other descriptors.
- If the information is contradictory to what you know, can it be verified? How does that affect your topic?
- Is the work scholarly or popular? Is the research methodology described? Are sources of information cited in text or bibliographies?
- Does it omit important and relevant information, or have an emotional writing style? These are clues into the author's bias.

Where is the information coming from?

- Look at the type of publisher. Is it from a commercial press, university press, government agency, a professional or trade organization or is it self-published?
- Look at the domain name of a website (.edu, .org, .gov, .com, .net)
- Look for affiliated institutions, parent organizations, and funding sources.

When was the information created?

- What is the copyright of the resource? Is there a more recent edition for books? Can you find information about when the website was last updated or modified?
- Is the information current or out of date? Is it information that never goes out of date?
Why was the information created?

- Think about whether this was intended to inform, persuade, entertain, instruct, or sell.
- Was it written for scholars, the public, professionals, or students?
- Look for mission statements, “About Us” links or purpose statements for whole journals or websites. The links and advertising on the websites can also give clues about the intended audience.

Adapted from www.library.wisc.edu/research-tips/evaluate-reliability-relevance.html

Have more questions? Contact a librarian for help:

- In person at the Priddy Library
- Chat with us: Look for the chat button on our website
- Send a text: (301) 799-8771
- Call us: (301) 738-6020
- Send an e-mail: shadylib@umd.edu