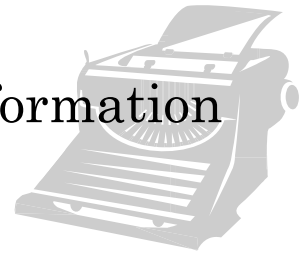


Evaluating Sources of Evidence and Information

A Handout from the EcoTeach Center, Duke University

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Suppose you wanted to learn about global warming: Is it real, and if so, is it really harming the environment? Here are three sources you could consult: (1) the Web site of Greenpeace, an organization dedicated to protecting the environment; (2) the Web site of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; and (3) the Web site of the National Association of Manufacturers, which promotes the interests of manufacturers. Which, if any, is likely to provide reliable information? How do you determine that?

As the example suggests, an essential task of the researcher is to evaluate sources of evidence and information. It is simply not the case that all sources are created equal. No doubt, every source will be flawed in some way, whether large or small. Your job is to weigh the strengths and weaknesses of each source as you judge its reliability and the role, if any, it will play in your analysis.

How can one evaluate the reliability of a source? Here is a checklist.

- What are the author's credentials? Does the author have an advanced degree in a relevant subject? Has he published many articles on the topic? What organization or institution is he affiliated with?
- Do others speak of the author as an authority? Do the author's works appear in the bibliographies of other studies on the topic? Are they discussed in literature reviews?
- Does the work contain evidence indicating that the author is well informed? Are his facts accurate? Does he draw on the work of others?
- Does the work contain evidence that the author is prejudiced in any way? Obviously, every author will have biases to one degree or another; but does the work seem to have an obvious agenda? Is he affiliated with a special-interest group? Who has funded his research?
- Is the work recent enough to provide up-to-date information? The shelf-life of economics articles is usually brief. Articles twenty or more years old can be quite dated.
- Does the work provide documentation to support important points? Does the work include a bibliography that can help you identify other sources?
- What can you discover about the publisher of the work? Is the publisher an organization or company with certain interests?

These are just some of the criteria you can use to evaluate the quality of a source.

[Checklist adapted from *Hodges' Harbrace Handbook*, 14th edition.]

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