
Critical Evaluation

This list of prompts, focusing on six critical questions, will help you to make judgements about whether a piece of information is appropriate for you to use in your research.

Ask yourself...

1. Who?

- Who is the author and what impact does this have on the quality and reliability of the information?
 - Is the author qualified to provide that information?
 - What is their academic specialism or experience in that subject area? Are they an expert in the field?
 - Can you identify other work the author has published? Have they published widely on the topic?
- Who is the intended audience and does this impact on the information that has been presented?
- Has the work gone through a peer review or editing process, where academics in the field have evaluated the quality prior to publication?

2. What?

- What type of information is it? Does this impact on how you intend to use it? (For example, are there copyright restrictions?)
- How well does this information relate to your search topic?
- Does it help answer your question, support or refute your arguments? Or does it provide information that you didn't know about until you read it that you will need to corroborate?
- What makes it useful? Does it provide a good definition and background knowledge? Does it offer information that is more in-depth and focused?

3. When?

- When was the information published or made available online? When was it last updated? Does this impact on the reliability of the information?
- Is the information's currency appropriate for the job you need it to do?
- If you are looking for up-to-date sources, is this information the most recent reference available on the topic?
- Were you looking for latest findings within a subject or were you looking for historical perspectives or trends?
- If it's from a book or e-book is there a newer edition available? (Double check an e-book's publication date, as the date you see might be the date it was turned into an e-book).
- If it's from a website, does the site look maintained with few broken links?

- If it's a report or official source, are you given a version history or list of updates and amendments?

4. Where?

- Which information source did you use to find the information and is that source appropriate for your research need?
- Were you looking for academic sources? If so, was it published in a peer-reviewed journal?
- If you were looking for public opinion, professional literature, trade or official publications, have you used sources that you recognise and trust?
- If you found it online, what does the URL reveal? The Top-Level Domain (TLD) says a lot about the authority of a web page:
 - .co.uk/.com - a commercial or business website
 - .edu/.ac.uk - an educational institution or University
 - .net - a network organisation
 - .org - a not-for-profit organisation
 - .gov - a government organisation

5. How?

- How did the authors reach their conclusions? Are you able to follow their argument?
- How reliable and trustworthy are their results? Can you verify them?
- Are the author's arguments supported by evidence or statistics?
- How does the information read? Does it sound objective and unbiased?

6. Why?

- Why did the author write the information?
- Do you know how the research was funded? Is it sponsored by a company, organisation or charity?
- Is the information designed to inform, teach, persuade or sell?

Evaluating information is highly subjective and your answers might change as you read and learn more about your search topic.

Once you've applied these questions, you need to decide whether you'd feel confident using the information and relying on it to support your studies.