Evaluating Information Sources

All information is not created equal or communicated responsibly. Use the criteria outlined in this handout to evaluate information sources for credibility.

★★ A Note About Internet Sources
Keep in mind, the Internet is not regulated, which means there are no policies in place to account for access, usage, or accuracy and quality of information. Anyone with access to the Internet can use it to publish anything on the Web. Evaluate Internet sources with a great deal of scrutiny.

✔ Authorship and Authority
Solid knowledge of a subject is usually gained by means of formal education and/or experience, and/or careful and thorough research. Examine the author’s credentials to gain insight about their expertise. Which degrees and/or certifications make the author qualified to report on the topic? What professional experience bolsters the author’s authority on the topic? Examine the adequacy of the publishing body, as well. Is the source produced by a reputable publisher, such as an academic press or respected news source? Review the publisher’s editorial policy to learn more about the processes used to guarantee accuracy and uphold integrity.

✔ Accuracy and Documentation
Trustworthy sources document the information used to report on a topic. The documentation lets readers verify information, and acknowledges the works of others. Documentation is usually found at the end of a document in a “References” or “Sources” section. Follow-up on references to determine if the author used the information properly. Is the information reported accurately and contextually?

✔ Currency and Relevance
Information changes all the time. Depending on the topic, the currency of the source might be of high importance. It is best to use up-to-date sources when consuming information on topics concerning present-time news events and scientific research. When was the source published and/or updated? The source must also be relevant to be useful. Relevancy is the quality of being appropriate and applicable to the topic. Is the source on-topic?

✔ Purpose
Does the source intend to inform or entertain, or promote or influence? Discerning the purpose of the source makes it easier to recognize prejudice or bias. Is the source pushing a personal, social, financial, or legislative agenda? Using prejudiced or biased information can build incomplete or false knowledge, and create or perpetuate deficient information or misinformation. As a best practice, use objective sources of information for research purposes.