Evaluating the Credibility of Your Sources

Remember, your use of sources is a means of supporting the argument you make. This means that the sources you reference need to be credible and authoritative. How do you know that your sources are of value? Ask yourself the following questions:

**Authorship: Who wrote it?**

- You can undertake brief on-line research into the author. Is the author affiliated with a university or another institution? What else has the author written? Citation databases will also tell you the number of times this source has been cited by other academics, giving you further insight into its credibility.
- If the author is not identified be wary of unnamed webmasters. It should be evident who created the content of the page. If the author is identified, what are his/her credentials? Does he/she have expertise in this field? You might want to do an Internet search on the author's name to verify his/her identity. Is contact information provided?

**Publishing Body or Web Servicer: Where was the source published?**

- Is it in a peer-reviewed scholarly journal (i.e. an article that is evaluated by other experts in the field) or published by a university press, professional society, or scientific publisher (all of which also operate peer-review processes)? These texts will have scholarly credibility.
- Was the source published on-line? This is not necessarily bad, but it will depend on who published it, why it was published, and how you intend to use the material. For example, there are on-line journals that utilize peer-review thus providing greater credibility to the publication. But there are many articles published under the guide of scholarly work, by individuals claiming expertise but which are of highly questionable credibility.
- This can help you determine the origin of the document, for example whether it is produced by a federal or local agency, a nonprofit organization or a commercial web site. A web site on a university or institution's server is more likely to be a reliable objective source than one on a commercial site.
Timeliness: Is the piece timely and appropriate for its field?

- In some disciplines, material can become outdated very swiftly. In others, texts can continue to be considered valuable for longer. You should search for additional texts on the topic to find related sources, sources in which this source is cited, and sources that cite this source in order to get a stronger picture of its intellectual relevance and value.
- Be aware of when the web page was created and how recently it's been updated. Is the information current? Outdated information and broken links indicate that the page is not being maintained.

Audience: For whom is the source written?

- Is the intended audience a scholarly one? If so, it should have a clear bibliography that you will also be able to consult for further sources.
- References and links to other sources can add to a document's credibility, depth of scholarship, and authority.

Sources:

https://www.college.columbia.edu/academics/integrity-sourcecredibility

http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/indiv/under/eval.html