

Post-truth: Evaluating Sources

They say it's a post-truth world out there: people choose political and policy positions based on their feelings and seemingly independent of verified facts, logic, or critical thought. This unfortunately includes those writing news and magazine articles and blog posts. We need to educate ourselves to get past that—to post-post truth, so to speak, and authentic credibility.

We have two reasons to develop a habit of evaluating sources: first, our credibility as student writers is based in part on the credibility of the sources we use. Maybe more importantly, our ability to think clearly and to thoughtfully evaluate events, policies, and persons depends on our being able to separate feelings, opinions, and wishful thinking from facts.

Evaluation checklist

It takes some investigation to figure out how trustworthy a source is—that is, how clearly it separates feelings from facts, as well as how factually accurate it is. Digital news gathering and reporting is now widely distributed and accessible to a worldwide army of “citizen journalists” who may or may not adhere to traditional journalistic disciplines. Most of the time there are no information gatekeepers to fact check. Be ready to do your own investigating, by clicking around your source websites, including [Contact](#) and [About Us](#). Try using the following checklist:

- Did you see it on social media? Red flag! Verify the story from several *other* sources. See [Social Media](#), below.
- Is there a named author? Does (s)he have experience or expertise in the subject matter? Avoid anonymously written articles or articles written by named authors but outside the area of their expertise.
- Does the author cite or otherwise acknowledge her own sources?
- If you check her sources, do they exist, and does she seem to represent them fairly?
- Is the author honest and up front about his own biases or self-interest?
- Is the information recent and based on the latest available facts?
- Is it written in an appropriate tone and style?
- Is there a publication date? A copyright date?
- How long has the source existed? New websites spring up every *minute*. Go with one that has an established audience and a track record.
- Is the website well maintained, with few or no 404/not found errors or broken links?
- Put on your thinking cap: Does the information *seem* realistic? Does the information match your own prior knowledge?

Dot-org, -edu, -gov, and -com

Think about the type of source. Organization, education, or government websites might seem more reliable than dot-coms, but consider them on a case-by-case basis. We are often told, for instance, that dot-orgs are better sources than dot-coms. However, reputable, objective news sites are often dot-coms, while a political party that is a dot-org may be highly partisan and biased to promote ideology over facts. Bearing this in mind, the following list ranks website examples from generally more reliable to less reliable:

- Books and academic journals (*American Historical Review*). These usually involve independent editors and/or professional peers who review the material before publication. Access peer-reviewed journals through library subscription databases like ProQuest or start with [Google Scholar](#), below.
- Newspapers and popular magazines, paper or online versions (*The Washington Post*, *Science*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Newsweek*). These usually involve editors and an established pre-publication process.
- Web pages sponsored or owned by established news, special interest, or government organizations (cnn.com, lupus.org, nih.gov). Again, editors and pre-publication screening is the norm.

- Corporate or commercial websites (groworganic.com, starbucks.com). They may want to sell you something, but they may also offer expert content with genuine value (it's how they drive traffic to their sites). However, quality control can vary.
- Personal website or blog with an identified author (pinchofyum.com). The author is willing to associate his name with the blog, so you might infer he means to do good work. However, blogs vary in quality and reliability.
- Personal website or blog without a named author. For blogs associated with commercial sites (sowtrueseeds.com), the staff may collaborate in writing the posts, attributing articles as a matter of policy to the organization instead of the individuals. In other cases, individuals might wish to conceal their identities (endalltyranny.wordpress.com).
- Wikis (*Wikipedia*). There may be some (or no) pre-publication screening of articles, though the collective “mind” of the wiki often arrives, eventually, at an objective product rivaling more traditional media. In any case, wiki articles are written (and rewritten) by groups of users usually unknown to the public (though they may be known to the moderators). See [Wikis](#), below.

Wikis

Wikipedia is probably the most well known of the wikis, which are collaborative sites allowing members to write posts and edit each other's posts. Wiki articles, for obvious reasons, are not attributed to individual authors and can vary in quality and accuracy. Content can also change as users revise and edit posts. Usually wikis are not reliable sources for academic papers, although good citations from a well cited article can help you find reliable sources elsewhere. (Yes, even *Wikipedia* wants its contributors to cite sources!)

Google Scholar

If you don't have subscription access to peer-reviewed journals as you would through a college library, one online resource to try is Google Scholar (scholar.google.com). Not everything is available in full text, and you might have to start with abstracts (summaries) and try to get hold of the full article at your local library. The pdf link, if there is one, is usually full text. Google Scholar offers you links to related articles as well.

Social media

Social media like Facebook are not, themselves, the sources of the articles you read there. You must follow them back to their original source and evaluate them in that context. Don't stop there, though—verify social media-shared articles from *several* other sources.

Social media were famously implicated in the “fake news” scandal of election year 2016. Some news items that appeared in users' Facebook feeds were outright fakes. However, even those that were not fake had the potential to mislead in a uniquely insidious way. The prime example was Facebook, which had programmed rules to “learn” users' interests and political bents from their previous postings and click activity, and then deliver similar articles, hoping to elicit more clicks, which caused even more similar articles to appear, which elicited more clicks.....So news that users got from their social media feeds was suspect on two levels. One was that some stories were actually fakes, and the other was that the stories people saw became increasingly biased and less representative of the whole truth.

Search results and aggregators

Search results—that page of headlines, links, videos, and images you get in response to a search—are not, themselves, sources, so you can't cite Google as your source (unless you're citing a blog post or press release written by Google about Google). You need to click through to the source document and cite that. Similarly, news aggregators like Yahoo News or Reddit collect news items from many different contributors and sources. You must cite the original source, not the aggregator. (Occasionally, however, a site like Yahoo News does write its own news stories, usually without naming an individual author.)

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