

JUDGING THE CREDIBILITY OF SOURCES



“One of the most important skills students need to be equipped with in today’s society is judging the credibility of sources. In the past, gatekeepers mediated all information that was dispersed to the public. Nowadays, anyone with a computer can project their voice out to the masses. This technology is a double-edged sword. It is great to be able to hear opinions from multiple perspectives, especially groups whose voices have historically been silenced. The problem is that young people (and many adults as well) have difficulty determining whose voices to trust.” (Breitner, 2019)

To judge whether a source is credible, students can consider a few key questions.

First, who is the author or creator? Do they have expertise or experience in the field they’re discussing? A scientist writing about climate change or a historian discussing a past event, for instance, is more likely to provide reliable information than an influencer or celebrity with no background in the topic. Verifying an author’s credentials is a useful first step in determining if they’re someone worth listening to on a specific subject.

Second, students should examine where the information is published. Reputable sources like academic journals, well-known newspapers, and government websites generally have editorial standards and fact-checking processes. In contrast, personal blogs or unofficial social media pages may not hold the same standards for accuracy.

A third factor to consider is the date of publication. Information in some fields, such as science and technology, changes rapidly. A medical article published ten years ago may no longer reflect current best practices, and it’s important for students to check if a source is up-to-date, particularly on topics that are quickly evolving.

Another important aspect is the author’s purpose or bias. Is the article intended to inform, persuade, entertain, or sell something? If an article is clearly one-sided or attempts to manipulate emotions, it may have an underlying bias, even if the information presented is factual. This doesn’t necessarily mean the information is wrong, but it does mean students should view it critically.

Lastly, students should compare information from multiple sources. If multiple reputable sources present similar facts, it's more likely that the information is credible. On the other hand, if only one obscure website makes a specific claim, it's worth questioning. Cross-referencing helps to ensure that students aren't basing their understanding on isolated or unreliable sources.

Examples in Action

Imagine a student named Alex is researching for a project on climate change. Alex finds two articles: one is published by a respected scientific journal and written by a climate scientist with 20 years of experience. The other is on a blog and written by a travel influencer who has no scientific training but insists climate change isn't real. In this case, Alex should lean towards trusting the scientific journal article because it comes from an expert and a reliable source.

Or consider a student named Maria who is researching new medical treatments for her biology paper. She finds an article on a well-known medical website published last year and another on an obscure website published ten years ago. The newer source is more likely to reflect recent research, which is essential for a field like medicine that is always advancing.

ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS IN PAIRS.

- 1. What is the first question students should ask when evaluating the credibility of a source?**
- 2. Why is it important to consider the publication date of a source?**
- 3. How can an author's purpose or bias affect the credibility of a source?**
- 4. In the example of Alex, why is the scientific journal article considered more credible than the blog?**
- 5. What benefit does cross-referencing information from multiple sources provide?**