

Source Credibility – Evaluating The Reliability of a Source

Not every source is suitable for use in a formal research paper, and the ultimate guide of what is appropriate and what is not is your professor. Bring any questionable sources to him or her for approval. Generally, however, books on your topic and scholarly journal articles are reliably safe. There are a few sources that most professors would deem questionable.

1. **The Internet:** While online scholarly journals do exist and many online sources are reliable, be aware that most of what pops up after an Internet search is not fit for your paper. If you are uncertain, use the online indexes in the Coastal Carolina University library, and ask a librarian or your professor if you question the validity of a source.
2. **Magazines or Newspapers:** Your professor may allow you to use non-scholarly periodicals, but many do not. Some magazines can be appropriate, but it depends on a professor's personal preferences.
3. **Explicator or Masterplots:** These are sources that basically offer a short explanation of a novel, poem, play, etc. In most cases, they are not useful for research purposes.

Guide for Internet Sources

According to Paul Gilster, "while the Internet offers myriad opportunities for learning, an unconsidered view of its contents can be misleading and deceptive...you cannot work comfortably within this medium until you have established methods for judging the reliability of Web pages, newsgroup postings..." (Gilster qtd. in Harnack). Use five criteria for evaluating information:

1. Authorship - who is the author and what are his credentials?
2. Publishing Body - the pb is the server on which the file is stored. The server cannot guarantee reliability of the information that is posted.
3. Objectivity/Knowledge - seek out other sources to see if the author has considered enough alternative views. Is there evidence to support the claims being made? Is the tone professional?
4. Accuracy or Verifiability - Hypertext is helpful in this area. For example, an author quoting statistics from another Internet source will often include a direct link to that source.
5. Currency - this refers to the history of publication and any revisions. When was the site last updated? Is the information still relevant?

Internet guide is from *Online! - a reference guide to using internet sources* by Andrew Harnack (2000).