

Using the 5 W's and 1 H to Evaluate Information

Answering the following questions about a book, article or webpage will help you decide if the source is of sufficient quality to be used for a research project.

Who?

- Is the author clearly identified?
- Are there links or other ways to find more information about the author(s)?
- Is the author an expert – is s/he qualified to write on the topic? Or, if the information is provided or maintained by an organization, can you identify a board of directors or the people who run the organization? Are they credible?
- Can you identify any potential sources of bias in the author(s)?
- Has the author published other materials?
- Who is the author addressing? Who is the intended audience – experts, the general public, a specialized group of people?

What?

- Does the information source give you facts and data or unsubstantiated statements or opinions?
- Is more than one viewpoint offered? Is the information balanced?
- Is the information backed up with cited references to credible sources (a list of references)? Is the information complete, or just part of the story?
- Is the tone of the writing objective or emotional?
- Is the information well-organized (are there sections for the background, methodology, results)?
- Are there spelling or grammatical errors?
- Is the source written in an informal style or does it include a lot of jargon/specialized vocabulary?

When?

- Do you know when the information was published?
- Is the information current, or is currency not important for your topic?
- Has the information been revised or recently updated?

Where?

- Where does the author work, or where is the sponsoring organization located?
- Where was the study done? Can the author(s) be contacted at a real world address?
- Is the information relevant to only one geographic area, or is geography not important to your topic?
- Where was the information published? Is the information source (newspaper, magazine, journal, web site) reputable?

Why?

- What was the author's purpose in writing? Why was this document created?
- Is the purpose to inform/teach, to convince, to entertain, or to sell?
- Can you identify political, ideological, cultural, religious, institutional, or personal biases in the writing or your knowledge of the author's background?

How?

- Was the information edited or reviewed before publication? Did the review process involve peer-review?
- How was the information gathered?
- Was there an experiment? Could you replicate the experiment?
- Whether or not there was an experiment, can you find the sources of information where the author got his/her information?
- How does the information compare to other information sources on the same topic – are there similar conclusions presented in other sources?

Finally, answer these questions:

- Can you find any limitations, or do you have any criticisms of your information source?
- Would you use your source in a paper despite these limitations or criticisms?