

LESSON 8

Authority Is Constructed and Contextual 2: Examining Source Characteristics and Bias to Determine Appropriateness

Examining source characteristics allows you to determine a source's **appropriateness** for use in academic research. A source that is appropriate has **credibility**, **reliability**, and **validity**. When you evaluate source characteristics, you must also consider **bias**. This means you have to examine how the **opinion**, **perspective**, or **prejudice** of those involved in the publication of the source (the *who*), as well as intended audience and purpose (the *why*), may have influenced choices with respect to the content.

Table 8.1 provides some ways to think about the appropriateness of your sources, which is information that will help you decide whether to keep this source and perform a more comprehensive

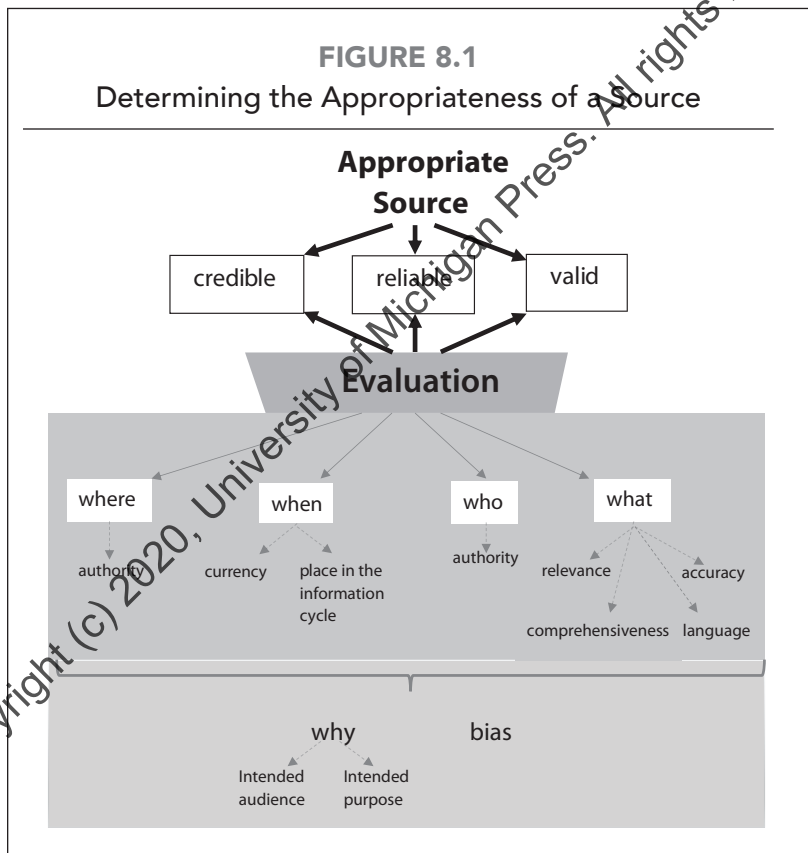
analysis. The information provided in Table 8.1 is a suggestion. You will need to look at all the characteristics of a source and how that information may interact when determining a source’s appropriateness. Conventions vary according to field too, which also impacts how one can judge appropriateness.

TABLE 8.1
Some Ways to Think about the Appropriateness of Sources

	Most Likely Appropriate	Possibly Appropriate	Most Likely Not Appropriate
why (purpose)	to inform	to persuade	to sell something <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ to present personal opinion ▪ to promote a particular political agenda
where (context)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ scholarly/peer reviewed ▪ scholarly/not peer-reviewed ▪ .gov or .edu website ▪ trade publication ▪ newspaper 	.com .org	social media
when	up-to-date information	not current but still has valuable historical or background information	when new information makes the information in your source irrelevant, you should not use it
who	expert in the field journalist	professional writer	non-professional writer
what (content)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ comprehensive coverage of a topic ▪ facts and statistics ▪ charts and graphs ▪ photographs ▪ citations 	commentary on an issue personal narrative	

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The table uses *wh*- questions as a way to perform a deeper evaluation. *Why* establishes a foundation for your evaluation of the other characteristics (see Figure 8.1), which is why it comes first. *Why* is followed by *where* and *when* because if a source was not published in a credible or reliable place or the date of publication is not acceptable for your topic, then you do not need to consider it any longer. Tools for conducting a deeper analysis are provided after the table.



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Tools to help you consider each characteristic to determine appropriateness are provided with application tasks for your sources. Choose a few of the sources you have found to use for each of the tasks. Doing each task for just one source can be helpful as practice; however, because each source has its own individual characteristics, completing each task for three or more sources will allow you to compare sources, which will make your evaluation more complete.

Considering the *Why* to Recognize Bias

As you consider the where, when, who and what of a source, remember that the *why* underlies all of the choices made by those involved in the publishing of the source. It can affect each characteristic of the source and sometimes lead to bias. Considering the *why* includes thinking about the intended audience and purpose of those involved in the writing and publishing of the source. Ask yourself:

- Is the intended audience made up of scholars in the field? college-educated readers? any adult reader?
- Does the author want to inform the reader? Persuade the reader? sell the reader something? present an opinion or viewpoint?

As you conduct your evaluation of the source, you must keep in mind the author's intentions and how they influence choices about where to publish and what to include (or not). Allow your decision about the author's intended audience and purpose guide you as you consider the *where*, *when*, *who*, and *what* of each source.

Task 8.1

Examining the Why

As you evaluate each source, continue to consider these questions.

1. What is the author's intended audience?
2. What is the author's intended purpose?

Determining the Appropriateness of *Where*: Assessing Authority

To determine the appropriateness of the context, you must consider what authority the publication—the journal, news source, website—has and what possible biases it may have. These biases impact the quality of the information and the choices made about what to include. If a website is a .gov or .edu, the information is probably more authoritative and has less bias than the information found on a .com site. This is because the author of a .gov or .edu likely has strong qualifications to write about the topic and the publisher is less likely to have an agenda to promote. However, be aware that bias is never entirely lacking. A .gov or .edu may also promote a particular agenda as well, determined by political ideology or the stated mission of the site. It is up to you to do your research to ensure the credibility, reliability and validity of the information you use as support in your research.

Task 8.2

Examining the Where

Apply what you have learned about how to evaluate the where of a source to at least three of the sources you have found for your research.

Determining the Appropriateness of *When*: Assessing Currency and Place in the Information Cycle

How current the information is influences the appropriateness of your source. Refer back to the Information Cycle in Lesson 7. Information about an event becomes more comprehensive as information about an event evolves over time. If you are using a source for background or historical context, the information will be credible and reliable whether or not it is recent. If you are using statistical data from the source, however, you must be sure that it is up-to-date.

To achieve credibility in many fields, you must have the most up-to-date information, which means that your sources should not be more than about three years old. Think about your research topic and determine the cut-off year for information that is valuable for you.

Task 8.3

Examining the When

Apply what you have learned about how to evaluate the when of a source to at least three of the sources you have found for your research.

Determining the Appropriateness of *Who*: Assessing Authority

It is essential to consider the authority and the possible biases of those who are involved in the publication of the source. For example, an article written by someone who has written several articles on the same topic and is the leader in a related professional organization will probably have authority. At the same time, who that person is affiliated with, such as professional organizations and workplaces, can mean that this person has adopted a particular perspective, which influences content and leads to bias. Table 8.2 provides some qualifications for you to use when analyzing for authority.

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TABLE 8.2
Criteria for Determining the Appropriateness of Who

The Author	The Publisher	The Sponsor/Promoter
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ education ▪ work context ▪ experience in the field ▪ number of previous publications on this topic ▪ organizations he/she is a member of ▪ reputation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ age of the publishing company ▪ impact factor of journal (how often it is cited) ▪ reputation ▪ mission statement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ reputation ▪ mission statement ▪ connections to other organizations

Some criteria to help you evaluate the credibility and reliability of the author are listed.

- Is the author well-educated on this topic?
- Does the author have research experience/history in this area?
- Does the author have other publications on this topic?
- Does the author belong to organizations that might bias their perspective?
- Is the author well-known in the field or for knowledge/expertise in the topic area?

RESEARCH TIP

You will have to search for information about *who* online. If you are using an academic database, the detailed record often provides links to more information about the author and the journal in which the article can be found. Otherwise, a general online search can also provide information.