

Module 4.1 Synthesizing and evaluating information

Once you have found information, you need to decide whether it is reliable. We do this all the time in our daily lives; it's particularly important to consider the reliability of the information within an academic context. When writing your papers, you are trying to use the best research to support your thesis; if the work you cite isn't reliable, your paper will seem less reliable too.

It's important to be skeptical. Sometimes information is incorrect or poorly explained. It can be biased or unintentionally wrong. It can be dated or the sources used by the author might be outdated.

You can use a few principles you can use to critically evaluate what you find. It is one part logic, one part investigation. Just remember: is this information CRAAP? Currency, Relevance, Accuracy, Authority, and Purpose.

We will go through CRAAP point by point:

Currency- Is the information up-to-date? When was it published and how old are the cited sources? And, does that matter? Sometimes you need something published a hundred years ago, sometimes you need something published last week.

Relevance- is the information directly related to your topic? Does it fill a knowledge gap for you, or support another research article you've found? Or is it just something you thought was interesting? Relevance is very subjective, so be critical. You have deadlines so you can't read anything and everything. Decide if this is worth your precious time.

Accuracy- Can you verify this information? Do other sources you've read support this information? Check if there is a bibliography and look at the citations. If there is a quote you are drawn to, find the original source and see if the quote was in context. If you are looking at a research paper, you should see a detailed methodology section. Some sources, like websites, seem like they would be good sources, but in the age of "fake news" you need to verify the information you find. Wikipedia might seem legitimate but anyone can write a Wikipedia page. Satirical news websites like The Onion often fool people. It's tricky and sometimes impossible to find out the author of a website. Be skeptical!

Authority and Purpose. Ask who wrote this and why? What obvious or subtle biases might be present? Ask yourself: does the author know what they are talking about? What qualifications, experience, or education do they have related to this topic? Do they study or publish about this topic often?

What motivated them to write the book/chapter/article/etc...?

A book on cows written by a vegan and published by the organization People for the

Ethical Treatment of Animals would have a different perspective than one written by a cattle farmer and published by the Cattleman's Association.