

As consumers of information, we are constantly assessing the validity of the sources we see, hear, and read. When writing academic essays, we must often cite from these same outside sources to help support our thesis. Therefore, it's important that the information we use is credible and current. But because so much information is available to us, it's sometimes hard to discern which sources are trustworthy and which aren't.

For some college-level coursework, you may be required to use "scholarly" or "academic" sources. *Scholarly sources* are those that have been reviewed and approved by experts in their field, and the most common type of scholarly source is a peer-reviewed journal article. This review process ensures that the information published is of the highest quality.

The best place to begin looking for credible, scholarly sources is in the library. Western's databases, such as ProQuest and BadgerLink, provide access to these peer-reviewed journals.

Evaluating Sources

When evaluating your sources, print or online, consider the following:

- **Authority** – can the source be trusted? Does the author have the appropriate credentials (education, experience, title, affiliations) to write about the topic?
- **Accuracy** – is the data accurate? Has it been peer reviewed to make sure that it is accurate?
- **Objectivity** – is the source based more on facts or opinions? Is the information sponsored by an outside agency (think of oil companies sponsoring reports on environmental impacts)?
- **Currency** – how current is the information? Newer is usually better.
- **Coverage** – how in-depth is the material? Does the source give it adequate coverage?

Why Isn't Wikipedia a Credible Source?

Though we rely on Google to answer many of the questions that arise in our everyday lives, Google searches and Wikipedia are no match for researching and using scholarly sources. Because the World Wide Web is open to anyone and everyone, there is a lot of information out there—both good and bad. Sites like Wikipedia, where anyone can edit and add information, are great for answering simple questions about popular

culture, but you should not rely on them as accurate, trustworthy sources of information. Besides, in general, internet sources are less reliable than print sources because it's cheap and easy to put information online—not so of print sources.

Think of it this way. Would you prefer your doctor go to Wikipedia to research a cure for your ailment, or would you rather he or she consult an academic medical journal that has been reviewed and approved by a group of medical doctors?

Additionally, “popular” sources, such as *People* and *Reader's Digest*, should be used with caution. You can spot popular sources by their appearance. They're usually glossy, colorful, and full of pictures and advertisements. Unlike sources from scholarly journals, whose purpose is to inform us, the primary purpose of a popular source is to sell a product, entertain us, or convince us of something.

Depending on your topic and your instructor's requirements, a combination of popular and scholarly sources may be fine. Always consult with your instructor if you are uncertain.

Signs that the Source Is Not Credible

- It's anonymous, or you cannot identify its publisher.
- It contains bad grammar and/or misspelled words.
- It's obviously biased and/or does not acknowledge any opposition.
- It makes sweeping generalizations without providing support.
- The information is severely outdated or not dated at all.
- The tone/language is angry, hateful, critical, or overly sarcastic.
- It doesn't cite other sources or does not contain footnotes.
- Other sources (e.g. articles, books, etc.) do not support its findings (i.e. lack of corroboration).