

Assessing sources of evidence, especially online

First off: *why* do you need to know how to analyze sources of evidence, web-based or otherwise? Two reasons.

When you're arguing, you'll want to rely on reliable sources of evidence as the firm starting points for your argument. Otherwise, your argument will fall down, like the house built on sand. Plus you may look foolish!

When you're listening to an argument, you'll want to figure out whether the sources that are being used are reliable. If they aren't, you won't want to believe the argument. Furthermore, if you are going to reply to the argument, you'll want to point out the unreliability in detail: that will be a very effective way to refute the argument..

Second: why the *web*? There are many sources of information available to you, as your friendly librarian is always willing to point out. But let's face it: the World Wide Web is convenient. Plus for many current events topics it is a good place to find *some* kinds of sources—maybe even the *best* place. I'll recommend later in the course that you branch out and try other sources to find evidence for your arguments. But for now, let's look at the special difficulties of analyzing web sources.

Let me start by reviewing what you learned from chapter 8 of the textbook, *Asking the Right Questions*. We look for *evidence* in order answer the basic HDYKT? question when someone makes a factual claim, such as "Golden Rice will help reduce Vitamin A deficiency in poor children." There are many sources of evidence, including your own personal intuition, experience and observations. On many important issues, however, you may not have much personal experience. Furthermore, other people's intuitions, experiences and observations may turn out to be different from yours. In these cases, we are likely to *appeal to authorities* to provide evidence for our arguments.

As the textbook further points out, authorities can be wrong—not all authorities are *reliable*. So we need to ask a series of basic critical questions any time we want to rely on an authority. There are Three Big Questions you should always ask:

Question 1. How much expertise or training does the authority have about the subject about which he is communicating? Let's call this the *Expertise Question*.

Question 2. Was the authority in a position to have especially good access to pertinent facts? Let's call this the *Information Question*.

Question 3. Is there good reason to believe that the authority is relatively free of distorting influences? Let's call this the *Bias Question*.

(For further details about each of these, see the textbook.)

As the textbook finally points out, internet "authorities" can be particularly suspicious. Think about it this way: you yourself could publish a nice looking website, calling yourself "The Center for Golden Rice Studies," and announcing your "expert opinion" to the world. On the other hand, if you don't trust anything you read on the Web, you're missing out on a lot of readily available and true information.

I recommend that when analyzing the reliability of web-based information, you ask a fourth Big Question:

Question 4. Will someone get into trouble if the information turns out to be wrong? Will they lose face? Will their mistake hurt their reputation? Could they even maybe be sued for the false information?

If you can't find out who the author of the information is, or if that author doesn't have any real-world exist you can verify, it's probably a mistake to rely on his/her information.

But if there is an identifiable person or group with something to lose, then it's more likely that the information is reliable. It's like they're offering you a "money back guarantee." **So let's call this the *Guarantee Question*.**

For the purposes of this class, here is how I want you to go about actually analyzing a website's reliability. You will need to take three steps:

- Step 1. Figure out who "owns" or "wrote" the page and website.
- Step 2. Apply the assessment standards for sources, one by one.
- Step 3. Weigh the results and come to an overall assessment of the trustworthiness of the source.

Often in practice these steps get mixed up. That's OK, but when you write up your analysis for me, be sure to go through each step one by one. There's a form at the end of this reading that you can use.

Step 1. Figure out who is responsible for the page and the website.

Notice that all four of the Big Questions require you to know who is responsible for the webpage and website—it's that person, persons, group or entity that you need to test for Expertise, Information, Bias and Guarantee. Now, in most print publications, the author is named and possibly even identified further. You can be pretty certain that they exist in the real-world. This is not the case online. A web search may have brought you to one page in a larger website; it may not say who wrote it, on the page or indeed anywhere on the site. Further, the person who wrote the page may or may not be the same as the person responsible for the whole site.

Your first step therefore is to find out who the source is: who "owns" and is responsible for the information on the page, and on the site as a whole. By "source" I mean both individual people, like Smith, and organizations, like Iowa State University.

You probably already have some skill at doing this. Here are some basic tips for finding out who is responsible for the information.

(a) First check the page itself carefully, top to bottom. Is there an author identified anywhere on it?

(b) If you're looking at one page in a larger website, try to find the main homepage. And from the homepage, look around to find out who the author is and what he is involved with. You can often find the homepage by taking off some of the back part of the URL. For example, if you wanted to find out who I was from my homepage, you would go from

www.public.iastate.edu/~goodwin

to

www.public.iastate.edu/

which would take you to

www.iastate.edu

So you'd see I was at ISU, and could start finding out what ISU was.

(c) Check the sidebars and bottom of the page for an "about the author" or "about this site" link. Does the page or website owner have a real-world existence that you can confirm (like at a university)? Is there a write-up describing the owner's qualifications, background and ideas?

(d) Google the owner's name and see if you can locate information about who he/she/it is.

When you write up a source analysis formally, be sure to tell me both who the owner(s) of the page and site are in detail—not just their names, but what sort of people/groups they are. And tell me also how you found out.

Step 2. Apply the assessment standards for argument, one by one.

Once you find who the source is, the next step is to *analyze* it: break it down into "pieces" and examine the "pieces" one by one. At this point, you ask the four Big Questions: Expertise, Information, Bias and Guarantee. You look at the website carefully, so you can point to specific details on it that support your answer. Be sure to note any conflicting information as well—the answer to any of the Big Questions is likely not a simple "yes" or "no."

Step 3. Weigh the results and come to an overall assessment of the trustworthiness of the source.

Practically every source will have some strong features and some weak features. Maybe it will be Expert and with a Guarantee, but very Biased; or unBiased, but not Expert. Plus it may have features other than Expertise, Bias, Information or Guarantee that seem important to figuring out whether it is trustworthy.

Your final step is to weigh all the pluses and minuses, and come to an overall assessment of the trustworthiness of the source. Do you trust it? Would you be willing to rely on it in a debate or not? If the other side used it in a debate, would you challenge the authority or accept it?

Remember also that the decision you're making is whether to trust *this information* from it. Sometimes you may be willing to trust *certain* things a source says, but not *others*.

In a formal source analysis, state your overall decision, and defend it briefly.

Practice Exercise: To test your understanding, go back to the websites linked from the first case ("The Neighbors"). Test them with the four questions. Which of those websites are more reliable? Which of them are less? Which are totally unreliable? Why?

NOTE: If I give you a "pop quiz" on this reading, I will ask you to list the four Big Questions, stating them in full sentences and in your own words. Remember, quizzes are closed book but "open" everything else, so feel free to type/write up your answer now, and just hand it in at quiz time.

Source analysis form

Information you want to use from this source:

URL:

Date you consulted it:

Page title:

STEP 1: Who is responsible?

Who is responsible for the page? Who is he/she/it?

HDYKT?

Who is responsible for the website? Who is he/she/it?

HDYKT?

STEP 2: Ask the Big Questions:

1. Expertise? HDYKT?

2. Information? HDYKT?

3. Bias? HDYKT?

4. Guarantee? HDYKT?

STEP 3: FINAL JUDGMENT: Balancing the positive and the negative, do you rely on this information? Why or why not?