

## Skill 19.2 Evaluate sources for reliability, credibility, angle of vision, and degree of advocacy.

When you read sources for your research project, you need to evaluate them as you go along. As you read each potential source, ask yourself questions about the author's reliability, credibility, angle of vision, and degree of advocacy.

### 19.2

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### Reliability

"Reliability" refers to the accuracy of factual data in a source. If you check a writer's "facts" against other sources, do you find that the facts are correct? Does the writer distort facts, take them out of context, or otherwise use them unreasonably? In some controversies, key data are highly disputed—for example, the frequency of date rape or the risk factors for many diseases. A reliable writer acknowledges these controversies and doesn't treat disputed data as fact. Furthermore, if you check out the sources used by a reliable writer, they'll reveal accurate and careful research—respected primary sources rather than hearsay or secondhand reports. Journalists of reputable newspapers (not tabloids) pride themselves on meticulously checking out their facts, as do editors of serious popular magazines. Editing is often minimal for Web sources, however, and they can be notoriously unreliable. As you gain knowledge of your research question, you'll develop a good ear for writers who play fast and loose with data.

### Credibility

"Credibility" is similar to "reliability" but is based on internal rather than external factors. It refers to the reader's trust in the writer's honesty, goodwill, and trustworthiness and is apparent in the writer's tone, reasonableness, fairness in summarizing opposing views, and respect for different perspectives. Audiences differ in how much credibility they will grant to certain authors. Nevertheless, a writer can achieve a reputation for credibility, even among bitter political opponents, by applying to issues a sense of moral courage, integrity, and consistency of principle.

"Credibility" is synonymous with the classical term *ethos*. See Concept 3.2, pp. 48–50; see also pp. 320–322.

### Angle of Vision and Political Stance

By "angle of vision," we mean the way that a piece of writing is shaped by the underlying values, assumptions, and beliefs of its author, resulting in a text that reflects a certain perspective, worldview, or belief system. Of paramount importance are the underlying values or beliefs that the writer assumes his or her readers will share. You can get useful clues about a writer's angle of vision and intended audience by doing some quick research into the politics and reputation of the author on the Internet or by analyzing the genre, market niche, and political reputation of the publication in which the material appears.

Angle of vision is discussed in detail in Concept 3.1, pp. 42–48. See also Chapter 4, pp. 78–91, which shows how analyzing angle of vision helps you read a text with and against the grain.

**Determining Political Stance** Your awareness of angle of vision and political stance is especially important if you are doing research on contemporary cultural or political issues. In Table 19.1, we have categorized some well-known political commentators, publications, policy research institutes (commonly known as *think tanks*), and blogs across the political spectrum from left/liberal to right/conservative.

**TABLE 19.1** Angles of Vision in U.S. Media and Think Tanks: A Sampling Across the Political Spectrum\*

Commentators				
Left	Left Center	Center	Right Center	Right
Barbara Ehrenreich Bob Herbert Michael Moore (film-maker) Bill Moyers (television) Paul Krugman Thom Hartman (radio) Rachel Maddow (television)	E. J. Dionne Leonard Pitts Eugene Robinson Nicholas Kristof Maureen Dowd Mark Shields Frank Rich	David Ignatius Thomas Friedman Kathleen Hall Jamieson Kevin Phillips David Broder William Saletan Mary Sanchez	David Brooks Peggy Noonan Jonah Goldberg Andrew Sullivan George Will Ruben Navarrette, Jr.	Charles Krauthammer Cal Thomas Glenn Beck (radio/TV) Rush Limbaugh (radio/TV) Bill O'Reilly (radio/TV) Kathleen Parker Thomas Sowell

Newspapers and Magazines**		
Left/Liberal	Center	Right/Conservative
<i>The American Prospect</i> <i>Harper's</i> <i>Los Angeles Times</i> <i>Mother Jones</i> <i>The Nation</i> <i>New York Times</i> <i>New Yorker</i> <i>Salon</i> <i>Sojourners</i>	<i>Atlantic Monthly</i> <i>Business Week</i> <i>Commentary</i> <i>Commonweal</i> <i>Foreign Affairs</i> <i>New Republic</i> <i>Slate</i> <i>Washington Post</i>	<i>American Spectator</i> <i>Fortune</i> <i>National Review</i> <i>Reader's Digest</i> <i>Reason</i> <i>Wall Street Journal</i> <i>Washington Times</i> <i>Weekly Standard</i>

Blogs		
Liberal/Left	Center	Right/Conservative
americablog.com crooksandliars.com dailykos.com digbysblog.blogspot.com firedoglake.com huffingtonpost.com mediamatters.com talkingpointsmemo.com wonkette.com	donklephant.com newmoderate.blogspot.com politics-central.blogspot.com rantingbaldhippie.com stevesilver.net themoderatevoice.com washingtonindependent.com watchingwashington.blogspot.com	firstinthenation.us instapundit.com littlegreenfootballs.com michellemalkin.com polipundit.com powerlineblog.com sistertoldjah.com redstate.com townhall.com



with advocacy organizations (the Sierra Club, the National Rifle Association) will have a clear editorial bias. When a writer has an ax to grind, you need to weigh carefully the writer's selection of evidence, interpretation of data, and fairness to opposing views. Although no one can be completely neutral, it is always useful to seek out authors who offer a balanced assessment of the evidence. Evidence from a more detached and neutral writer may be more trusted by your readers than the arguments of a committed advocate. For example, if you want to persuade corporate executives on the dangers of global warming, evidence from scholarly journals may be more persuasive than evidence from an environmentalist Web site or from a freelance writer for a leftist popular magazine such as *Mother Jones*.

**19.3**

Use your rhetorical knowledge to evaluate Web sources.

**Skill 19.3 Use your rhetorical knowledge to evaluate Web sources.**

In the previous section we focused on reading sources rhetorically by asking questions about a source's reliability, credibility, angle of vision, and degree of advocacy. In this section we focus on evaluating sources from the World Wide Web.

**The Web As a Unique Rhetorical Environment**

In addition to familiar entertainment and commercial sites, the Web can be a powerful research tool, providing access to highly specialized databases, historical archives, museum collections, governmental documents, blogosphere commentary, scholarly portals useful for academic researchers, and much more. The Web is also a great vehicle for democracy, giving voice to the otherwise voiceless. Anyone with a cause and a rudimentary knowledge of Web design can create a site. The result is a medium that differs in significant ways from print in its creators, composition, and multimodal content.

**Criteria for Evaluating a Web Source**

When you evaluate a Web source, we suggest that you ask five different kinds of questions about the site in which the source appeared, as shown in Table 19.2. These questions, developed by scholars and librarians as points to consider when you are evaluating Web sites, will help you determine the usefulness of a site or source for your own purposes.

As a researcher, the first question you should ask about a potentially useful Web source should be, **Who placed this piece on the Web and why?** You can begin answering this question by analyzing the site's home page, where you will often find navigational buttons linking to "Mission," "About Us," or other identifying information about the site's sponsors. You can also get hints about the site's purpose by asking, What kind of Web site is it? Different kinds of Web sites have different purposes. You should be conscious of the purpose of

See Chapter 7, pp. 187–189, for Teresa Filice's essay evaluating the advocacy site "Parents: The Anti-Drug."

**TABLE 19.2** Criteria for Evaluating Web Sites

Criteria	Questions to Ask
1. Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is the document author or site sponsor clearly identified?</li> <li>Does the site identify the occupation, position, education, experience, or other credentials of the author?</li> <li>Does the home page or a clear link from the home page reveal the author's or sponsor's motivation for establishing the site?</li> <li>Does the site provide contact information for the author or sponsor such as an e-mail or organization address?</li> </ul>
2. Objectivity or Clear Disclosure of Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is the site's purpose clear (for example, to inform, entertain, or persuade)?</li> <li>Is the site explicit about declaring its point of view?</li> <li>Does the site indicate whether the author is affiliated with a specific organization, institution, or association?</li> <li>Does the site indicate whether it is directed toward a specific audience?</li> </ul>
3. Coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are the topics covered by the site clear?</li> <li>Does the site exhibit a suitable depth and comprehensiveness for its purpose?</li> <li>Is sufficient evidence provided to support the ideas and opinions presented?</li> </ul>
4. Accuracy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are the sources of information stated?</li> <li>Do the facts appear to be accurate?</li> <li>Can you verify this information by comparing this source with other sources in the field?</li> </ul>
5. Currency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Are dates included in the Web site?</li> <li>Do the dates apply to the material itself, to its placement on the Web, or to the time the site was last revised and updated?</li> <li>Is the information current, or at least still relevant, for the site's purpose? For your purpose?</li> </ul>

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the site, often revealed by the domain identifier, such as .com or .org. The most common kinds of sites are as follows:

- **.com** for commercial sites (promoting businesses and marketing services, often with no identified author)
- **.org** sites for nonprofit organizations or advocacy groups (some with balanced coverage but many with distinct angles of vision)
- **.edu** sites for colleges or universities (often complex sites with institutional information as well as scholarly and advocacy links)
- **.gov** or **.mil** sites for government agencies or military units (with a range of data and support for policies)

### Analyzing Your Own Purposes for Using Web Sources

Besides analyzing a sponsor's purpose for establishing a Web site, you also need to analyze your own purpose for using the site. To illustrate strategies for evaluating a Web site, we'll use as examples two hypothetical student researchers investigating the civic controversy over hydraulic fracturing (commonly called