

Evaluating Information: The Tests of Information Quality

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<http://www.virtualsalt.com/evalu8it.htm>

Reliable Information is Power

You may have heard that "knowledge is power," or that information, the raw material of knowledge, is power. But the truth is that only some information is power: reliable information. Information serves as the basis for beliefs, decisions, choices, and understanding our world. If we make a decision based on wrong or unreliable information, we do not have power—we have defeat. If we eat something harmful that we believe to be safe, we can become ill; if we avoid something good that we believe to be harmful, we have needlessly restricted the enjoyment of our lives. The same thing applies to every decision to travel, purchase, or act, and every attempt to understand.

Source Evaluation is an Art

Source evaluation—the determination of information quality—is something of an art. That is, there is no single perfect indicator of reliability, truthfulness, or value. Instead, you must make an inference from a collection of clues or indicators, based on the use you plan to make of your source. If, for example, what you need is a reasoned argument, then a source with a clear, well-argued position can stand on its own, without the need for a prestigious author to support it. On the other hand, if you need a judgment to support (or rebut) some position, then that judgment will be strengthened if it comes from a respected source. If you want reliable facts, then using facts from a source that meets certain criteria of quality will help assure the probability that those facts are indeed reliable.

The CARS Checklist for Research Source Evaluation

The CARS Checklist (**C**redibility, **A**ccuracy, **R**easonableness, **S**upport) is designed for ease of learning and use. Few sources will meet every criterion in the list, and even those that do may not possess the highest level of quality possible. But if you learn to use the criteria in this list, you will be much more likely to separate the high quality information from the poor quality information.

Credibility

trustworthy source, author's credentials, evidence of quality control, known or respected authority, organizational support. Goal: an authoritative source, a source that supplies some good evidence that allows you to trust it.

Accuracy

up to date, factual, detailed, exact, comprehensive, audience and purpose reflect intentions of completeness and accuracy. Goal: a source that is correct today (not yesterday), a source that gives the whole truth.

Reasonableness

fair, balanced, objective, reasoned, no conflict of interest, absence of fallacies or slanted tone. Goal: a source that engages the subject thoughtfully and reasonably, concerned with the truth.

Support

listed sources, contact information, available corroboration, claims supported, documentation supplied. Goal: a source that provides convincing evidence for the claims made, a source you can triangulate (find at least two other sources that support it).

Living with Information: The CAFÉ Advice

Here is one last piece of advice to help you live well in the world of information: Take your information to the Café (**C**hallenge, **A**dapt, **F**ile, **E**valuate).

Challenge

Challenge information and demand accountability. Stand right up to the information and ask questions. Who says so? Why do they say so? Why was this information created? Why should I believe it? Why should I trust this source? How is it known to be true? Is it the whole truth? Is the argument reasonable? Who supports it?

Adapt

Adapt your skepticism and requirements for quality to fit the importance of the information and what is being claimed. Require more credibility and evidence for stronger claims. You are right to be a little skeptical of dramatic information or information that conflicts with commonly accepted ideas. The new information may be true, but you should require a robust amount of evidence from highly credible sources.

File

File new information in your mind rather than immediately believing or disbelieving it. Avoid premature closure. Do not jump to a conclusion or come to a decision too quickly. It is fine simply to remember that someone claims XYZ to be the case. You need not worry about believing or disbelieving the claim right away. Wait until more information comes in, you have time to think about the issue, and you gain more general knowledge.

Evaluate

Evaluate and re-evaluate regularly. New information or changing circumstances will affect the accuracy and hence your evaluation of previous information. Recognize the dynamic, fluid nature of information. The saying, "Change is the only constant," applies to much information, especially in technology, science, medicine, and business.