



RES 1: Evaluating Sources

Locating **accurate**, **current**, and **effective** source material is the cornerstone of research-based writing. With the abundance of information in our digital age, working with sources during the research phase of a project can sometimes be overwhelming. However, it is the responsibility of all writers from all professions (including students) to recognize what makes sources effective or not. This skill is of paramount importance for a number of reasons in academic life and beyond:

- Being able to recognize effective sources helps you filter out less than reputable and/or inaccurate information.
- Identifying what makes sources credible helps improve your critical thinking skills and will likely help you become a more inquisitive person who looks for multiple possibilities and interpretations of information.
- Locating effective sources will help improve the overall quality of your projects and assignments because your professors expect you to develop this skillset as you progress through college and as your assignments become more demanding.

Finding sources takes practice. Visit the MTSU library's website for tutorials on creating keywords and using JEWL, the library's search engine.

When you do find a source that seems relevant to your writing project, the source must be assessed. Sources should not necessarily be labeled as "good" or "bad" since each rhetorical situation may call for different kinds of research; however, each source *should* be considered for its relevance and trustworthiness.

Reading Laterally

When working with digital sources for a writing project, students must remember that all sources need to be assessed for the value they can contribute to your writing project. One way to help sort through sources is to practice **lateral reading strategies**. Instead of reading up and down on the page or just glancing at the design of the piece, you can expect to leave the page of the source you are on in order to **dig deeper** into what makes the source credible and relevant. With lateral reading, you may leave the page *before* you do any reading at all. Here are some ways to dig deeper:

- **Instead of trusting a source because an "About the Author" section exists, ask:** Who is the author? Is the description of the author within the site helpful in determining credibility? How is the author related to the topic at hand? Is the author an expert in some way? Open a new tab to research the author.
- **Instead of trusting that the organization or sponsor sounds legitimate, ask:** Who is sponsoring this information? Is there any possible slant or bias from the organization sponsoring the content? How do you know? Open a new tab to research.
- **Instead of trusting a source because it *has* references, ask:** What kind of work is referenced? How current is the research referenced? Is the cited work trusted by experts in the field? How do you know? Open a new tab to research.
- **Instead of trusting a source based on professional looking design or domain attribution (.com, .org, .edu, .gov), ask:** What do I know about the sponsor of the information? Is there a parent group or company tied to the website? Is the information presented in the design of the piece supported by reliable evidence? Who financed the research or website itself? How do you know? Open a new tab to research.



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Ultimately, the goal of lateral reading is to ask questions about the information at hand by leaving the current page to investigate what is going on “behind the scenes” of a source.

Evaluation Systems

The MTSU library provides several evaluation systems to help students assess sources. You may want to check out each one to see what will work best for you and your project. Options include:

- The CRAAP test
- The BEAM method
- The News Literacy Project’s “Ten Questions for Fake News Detection”
- EasyBib’s Eight Point Checklist
- CQ Researcher’s “Fact or Fiction” Checklist

These evaluation tools can be found on the Walker Library website. Under “Research Guides,” select English 1020, then click on the “Evaluating Sources” tab. These tools can be used no matter which course you are taking.

Visit the Writing Center for more help on your writing project! Stop by LIB 362 or visit us online at [mtsu.mywconline.com](https://www.mtsu.edu/mywconline.com) to schedule an appointment.