

How can you determine whether or not a source is a good choice for your assignment?

## **Being a researcher is like being a detective--and your sources are your evidence.**

When you're deciding what sources to use for your paper, think about what evidence will help you solve your case.

## **The first question you have to ask yourself is “do I trust this source?”**

If a child had chocolate all over their face but insisted that they didn't eat candy, you'd be a little skeptical. Detectives regularly have to decide how reliable a witness is based on clues about them. It's exactly the same for research: you have to examine the source carefully.

Consider the person, people, or publications that produced a source to decide if it's credible, reliable, and trustworthy enough. Watch out for things like uninformed authors who are not credible experts, bias and intentional misinformation, and unprofessional publication platforms (like a blog) that do insufficient vetting and editing.

So, how can you spot those red flags? One key is looking outside of the source. Think about it this way: if you were investigating a crime, would you trust a suspect automatically if they said "I didn't do it?" Probably not. You'd question other people and try to find out how likely it is that the suspect is telling the truth.

It's the same with research. Just because a source or platform claims something doesn't mean that you should believe them. You often have to explore other sources in order to piece together different bits of information and get an accurate picture of a source's validity.

## **The next question is “Is this source good enough?”**

Not all evidence is of the same quality. Is yours good enough to rely on to solve your case, or to present in court?

In this case, "good" means up-to-date, informative, and accurate. We determine that by asking **when**, **why**, and **how** the information was created.

## **First: when was the source written?**

Not everything old is bad! An older source can provide valuable insight--however, up-to-date information can include important content missing in older sources.

Think about solving a crime. It may be useful to know that 6 months ago, the suspect was driving a white sedan. However, it is likely more useful to know that 2 days ago the suspect was seen in a blue van.

In research, the publication date can be more or less important, depending on what discipline you are in and what angle you are taking for your research.

## **Next: why was the source created?**

Think of witnesses in a case. If someone stood to inherit a lot of money in a court case, you would keep that in mind while reviewing their testimony. The same is true for research - ask yourself, *why* did the author write this piece, make this video, etc?

Is the intent of the author to inform, to explore, to convince or persuade, to entertain, or to sell? For example, news is usually meant to inform the reader, while scholarly articles and books are meant to explore a topic in more depth.

## **Finally: how was the source researched?**

Imagine you are a detective and each source is a folder of evidence being handed to you. You probably wouldn't trust an evidence file if the junior detective who put it together wouldn't tell you where or how they got the evidence, or said they'd just written down some gossip they'd overheard.

Be sure the sources you're using were researched and assembled in a way that makes it more likely to be accurate.

Evaluation is an art, not a science, and there is no “one size fits all” set of guidelines for this important activity. As always, if you have questions or need a hand, just ask a librarian at [lib.uncw.edu/ask](https://lib.uncw.edu/ask).