University of Bedfordshire

Evaluating a source

Other related Study Hub guides in the critical thinking series include:

- Evaluating a source
- A guide to critical reading
- Themed notes method
- Showing analysis and evaluation in your writing
- Constructing an argument
- A guide to developing an argument map
- A guide to synthesis
- A guide to critical writing

Introduction

During your time at university, you will need to demonstrate good evaluation and analytical skills when writing assignments. A good evaluation will require you to carry out background reading so that you can back up your comments with evidence – **do not simply state what you think**. The key to critical evaluation is a fair and balanced review of a source. It is therefore important that you do not solely focus on negative aspects of your source and acknowledge positive features of the work as well.

Areas to consider when evaluating a source

The nature of your assignment will influence how you evaluate the usefulness of a source. However, there are some basic areas that you would be expected to consider:

When was the source published?

It is important to consider how long ago a source was published. Over time the credibility of theories, concepts and models will change therefore what was highly influential several years ago may now be out of date. If you are critically examining

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an older source, you might want to examine more recent research to see if the findings have stood the test of time.

Who wrote the source?

Before reading the source, it is important to think critically about who the author is. Ask yourself:

- Is the author a subject matter expert? If not, are they qualified to discuss the area they are reporting?
- Does the source contain details of the author's credentials qualifications?

Who wrote the source will be a particularly important area to address if you are critiquing a review article. This is because the content of a review article will typically be based on an individual's own experiences or perceptions and so is not based on the presentation of experimental findings. It is therefore essential that you research the author so that you can ascertain how well they know their subject area (are they a world authority?). If you find an author is not an expert then one might question the accuracy/quality of what they discuss.

Where was the source published?

Where a source is published can tell you a lot about its quality. Question:

- Is the source published in a well-established peer-reviewed journal?
  If so, a panel of subject matter experts will have reviewed the article, which should ensure high quality.

If the source is not published in a peer-reviewed journal how good is its publication location? Resources such as Wikipedia may be a useful first source for information but do not constitute high-quality publications.

How relevant is the source?

You should only use sources that are directly related to your assignment question. Including sources that are not related to the topic could cause your tutor to question how well you have understood the assignment.

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Who benefits?
Organisations that pay for by sources to be written may have an agenda behind what information is presented. This could influence the quality and accuracy. For example, imagine a report had been published that questions the safety of a vaccination. However, it later materialises that the source author had been paid to conduct the research by a group that was in favour of banning vaccinations (but had not acknowledged this at the time of publication). Potentially, this may mean that the author had an unspoken agenda whilst writing their report that could have distorted how they presented information.

Evaluation checklist

The following checklist should be used to help you to read and critically reflect on the content using a guided reading process. During your reading, make sure that you keep an open mind and apply the standards needed for a proper critical evaluation.

- Be clear and accurate with your assessment and pick out the relevant points
- Fully evaluate the depth and breadth of the discussion so you do not leave any points out i.e.
  - What is the purpose of the article?
  - What concepts are discussed?
  - What terminology is used?
  - Are any organisations mentioned? If so, can you identify if they have applied any theory?
  - Is there any new thinking highlighted?
- Assess the quality of the article: is it logical? Is it well written and clear? Can you poke holes in arguments? Contradictions? Is evidence well used to back up points? What is your opinion of the content?

(Wason & Southall 2016, p.16)

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Further information

The Learning Resources Study Hub provides a range of opportunities (such as workshops and drop-ins) for you to enhance your academic skills. For more information visit: **lrweb.beds.ac.uk/studyhub**

Reference

Wason, H. and Southall, J. (2016) 'Practitioner Insights', *Critical Thinking Skills Toolkit Student Guide* p. 16-19 [unpublished] (Available from: Kingston University)

Below are two evaluation tools that can be used to evaluate a source

Practitioner Insights: Trade / Organisational Reports

Full UoB Harvard reference of
Report…………………………………………………………………………………………

Practitioner Insights Framework	Findings
Analysis	
Key Points	
Companies / organisations discussed – have they applied any theory? Any new thinking highlighted?	
Evaluation: What is your opinion of this data? Do you agree with the findings? Is there any information missing? Are there any contradictions? How does it compare with any other information collected?	

(included with permission from Wason & Southall 2016, p18)

Practitioner Insights: Journal Articles

Analyse and interpret the practitioner article according to the Practitioner Insights framework below then staple to the top of your article.

Full UoB Harvard reference of article………………………………………………………………………………………

Practitioner Insights Framework	Analysis and Interpretation
Purpose of article? Summary of key points.	
Terminology? Concepts?	
Companies / organisations discussed – have they applied any theory? Any new thinking highlighted?	
Evaluation: Article quality? Logical? Well written? Clear? Any bias? How does it compare with other journal article findings?	

(included with permission from Wason & Southall 2016, p19)

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