Evaluating Sources Cheat Sheet

Remember that the credibility of a source can be compromised or manipulated by the presence of bias or misinformation. Here are some things to think about:

- **Be deliberate in where you look for sources.** There are countless places to search, from different internet browsers, to academic databases, or looking at printed or primary sources. Ask yourself, where is the best place to find this information, and why? Where do the experts go? Do I need to access or learn to use resources that are new to me?

- **Be critical of the language used.** Look for words that mark a subjective opinion like "good" or "better", and superlatives like "never" or "almost always". Articles that propose a point of view should be explicit that the information presented is opinion rather than fact. They should be transparent about the intent of the information and all of the people responsible for its production (sponsors, publishers, etc.). In scholarly articles look for disclaimers about limitations and conflict of interest.

- **Don't mistake STYLE for CONTENT.** Information that is intended to persuade or manipulate its audience with misinformation and disinformation is often formatted in a way that makes it appear attractive and/or legitimate. One way you can test the content of a website is to copy the words onto an empty document and remove all of the formatting. Then read it and ask, does all of this still sound sensible?

- **Think critically about a source's own claims of credibility.** Just because a website or author or publisher claims to be 'trusted' or 'fact-based', that doesn't automatically make the claim true (although it might be). Be very wary of articles online whose author does not provide links to the original context of the information presented. Since real facts can be verified independently through many different sources, don't trust anything that portrays itself as the *only* source for truth. Search laterally to investigate claims.

- **Examine the information's value in context of the need.** The criteria used to evaluate may be different depending on the question and audience. There may be times when the answers you're looking for aren't necessarily verifiable facts.

Evaluating Sources

How to judge – **search laterally** using **The Four Moves: SIFT**

What to judge – Information in and about the source (its **content and its context**) using **PIE** and **SMELL**

The Four Moves: SIFT
S – **Stop**
I – **Investigate** source externally
F – **Find** trusted coverage
T – **Trace** media and claims back to their original context

Evaluative Criteria: PIE (low, medium, high)

P – Proximity
- How close was the author to the event or information provided? Is it firsthand?
- How close are the other witnesses or sources quoted?

I – Independence
- What is the author's conflict of interest or level of self-interest in telling this story? What might they stand to gain or lose?

E – Expertise
- What prolonged experience does the author have in the subject field they are covering?
- Does their knowledge about the topic lend confidence to their report?

Evaluative Criteria: SMELL

S – Source
- Who is providing the information? Are all creative and production sources clear?
- Can you verify the credentials of the authors, publishers, donors, associated institutions, etc.?

M – Motivation
- Is the tone of the content persuasive or purely informative?
- Do they use hyperbolic language?
- Is their viewpoint, biases, and intent clear?
- Are they promoting a product or policy?

E – Evidence
- What independently verifiable evidence do they provide for generalizations made?
- Are their conclusions transparent?

L – Logic
- Does the evidence presented support the author's conclusions?
- Do their claims make sense both internally, within the content, and externally, in context of everything else I know?
- Watch for internal logic failures:
  - anecdotes presented as proof
  - flawed comparisons
  - binary thinking

L – Left out
- Whose voices or what information is missing?
- Is the author omitting or marginalizing the viewpoint of any other groups?
- How are others from alternate sources responding to the information, especially those whose perspectives differ by race, gender, class, generation, etc.?
- How might knowing their perspective change our interpretation of the info?

Adapted from material in these references:
Caulfield, M. (2019, June 17). SIFT (The Four Moves). Retrieved November 30, 2020, from https://hapgood.us/2019/06/19/sift-the-four-moves/
McManus, J. H. (2017). Chapter 8: The SMELL Test. In McManus, J. H., *Detecting bull: How to identify bias and junk journalism in print, broadcast and on the wild web*. Sunnyvale, CA: Unvarnished Press.
https://ethics.journalism.wisc.edu/files/2020/07/3-The-Smell-Test-McManus.pdf

Appendix b. Questions to Ask When Evaluating Sources

Criteria: **P**roximity **I**ndependence **E**xpertise   **S**ource **M**otivation **E**vidence **L**ogic **L**eft out

Activity: Identify 1-2 evaluative criteria addressed by each question

.Source Info category:	Authority
Ex. "Source" or "S"	Who is the author?
	What else has the author written?
	In which communities and contexts does the author have expertise?
	Does the author represent a particular set of world views?
	Do they represent specific gender, sexual, racial, political, social and/or cultural orientations?
	Do they privilege some sources of authority over others?
	Do they have a formal role in a particular institution (e.g. a professor at Oxford)?
Source Info category:	**Purpose**
	Why was this source created?
	Does it have an economic value for the author or publisher?
	Is it an educational resource? Persuasive?
	What (research) questions does it attempt to answer?
	Does it strive to be objective?
	Does it fill any other personal, professional, or societal needs?
	Who is the intended audience?
	Is it for scholars?
	Is it for a general audience?
Source Info category:	**Publication & format**
	Where was it published?
	Was it published in a scholarly publication, such as an academic journal?
	Who was the publisher? Was it a university press?
	Was it formally peer-reviewed?
	Does the publication have a particular editorial position?
	Is it generally thought to be a conservative or progressive outlet?
	Is the publication sponsored by any other companies or organizations? Do the sponsors have particular biases?
	Were there any apparent barriers to publication?
	Was it self-published?
	Were there outside editors or reviewers?
	Where, geographically, was it originally published, and in what language?
	In what medium?
	Was it published online or in print? Both?
	Is it a blog post? A YouTube video? A TV episode? An article from a print magazine?

	What does the medium tell you about the intended audience?
	What does the medium tell you about the purpose of the piece?
Source Info category:	**Relevance**
	How is it relevant to your research?
	Does it analyze the primary sources that you're researching?
	Does it cover the authors or individuals that you're researching, but different primary texts?
	Can you apply the authors' frameworks of analysis to your own research?
	What is the scope of coverage?
	Is it a general overview or an in-depth analysis?
	Does the scope match your own information needs?
	Is the time period and geographic region relevant to your research?
Source Info category:	**Date of Publication**
	When was the source first published?
	What version or edition of the source are you consulting?
	Are there differences in editions, such as new introductions or footnotes?
	If the publication is online, when was it last updated?
	What has changed in your field of study since the publication date?
	Are there any published reviews, responses or rebuttals?
Source Info category:	**Documentation**
	Did they cite their sources?
	If not, do you have any other means to verify the reliability of their claims?
	Who do they cite?
	Is the author affiliated with any of the authors they're citing?
	Are the cited authors part of a particular academic movement or school of thought?
	Look closely at the quotations and paraphrases from other sources:
	Did they appropriately represent the context of their cited sources?
	Did they ignore any important elements from their cited sources?
	Are they cherry-picking facts to support their own arguments?
	Did they appropriately cite ideas that were not their own?

Appendix c. Questions to Ask (possible answers)

Criteria: **<u>P</u>roximity <u>I</u>ndependence <u>E</u>xpertise**   **<u>S</u>ource <u>M</u>otivation <u>E</u>vidence <u>L</u>ogic <u>L</u>eft out**

Criteria addressed by each question: **possible answers**

Source Info category:	Authority
Source	Who is the author?
Proximity, Expertise	What else has the author written?
Independence, Expertise	In which communities and contexts does the author have expertise?
Independence, Motivation	Does the author represent a particular set of world views?
Source, Left out	Do they represent specific gender, sexual, racial, political, social and/or cultural orientations?
Motivation, Logic	Do they privilege some sources of authority over others?
Source, Expertise	Do they have a formal role in a particular institution (e.g. a professor at Oxford)?
Source Info category:	**Purpose**
Independence, Motivation	Why was this source created?
Source, Motivation	Does it have an economic value for the author or publisher?
Motivation, Evidence	Is it an educational resource? Persuasive?
Evidence, Logic	What (research) questions does it attempt to answer?
Independence, Logic	Does it strive to be objective?
Motivation, Left out	Does it fill any other personal, professional, or societal needs?
Motivation, Left out	Who is the intended audience?
Expertise, Left out	Is it for scholars?
Expertise, Left out	Is it for a general audience?
Source Info category:	**Publication & format**
Proximity, Source	Where was it published?
Expertise, Evidence	Was it published in a scholarly publication, such as an academic journal?
Motivation, Source	Who was the publisher? Was it a university press?
Motivation, Evidence	Was it formally peer-reviewed?
Independence, Motivation	Does the publication have a particular editorial position?
Independence, Logic	Is it generally thought to be a conservative or progressive outlet?
Source, Left out	Is the publication sponsored by any other companies or organizations? Do the sponsors have particular biases?
Left out	Were there any apparent barriers to publication?
Independence, Expertise	Was it self-published?
Source, Independence	Were there outside editors or reviewers?
Proximity, Logic, Left out	Where, geographically, was it originally published, and in what language?
Evidence, Left out	In what medium?
Source, Evidence, Left out	Was it published online or in print? Both?
Source, Expertise, Evidence	Is it a blog post? A YouTube video? A TV episode? An article from a print magazine?
Motivation, Left out	What does the medium tell you about the intended audience?

Motivation, Independence	What does the medium tell you about the purpose of the piece?
Source Info category:	**Relevance**
Expertise, Evidence, Logic	How is it relevant to your research?
Evidence, Logic	Does it analyze the primary sources that you're researching?
Proximity, Evidence	Does it cover the authors or individuals that you're researching, but different primary texts?
Independence, Expertise	Can you apply the authors' frameworks of analysis to your own research?
Expertise, Evidence, Logic	What is the scope of coverage?
Motivation, Evidence	Is it a general overview or an in-depth analysis?
Motivation, Logic	Does the scope match your own information needs?
Evidence, Logic	Is the time period and geographic region relevant to your research?
Source Info category:	**Date of Publication**
Proximity, Source	When was the source first published?
Expertise, Source	What version or edition of the source are you consulting?
Evidence, Logic	Are there differences in editions, such as new introductions or footnotes?
Source, Logic	If the publication is online, when was it last updated?
Source, Expertise	What has changed in your field of study since the publication date?
Evidence, Logic, Left out	Are there any published reviews, responses or rebuttals?
Source Info category:	**Documentation**
Source, Evidence	Did they cite their sources?
Proximity, Source, Evidence	If not, do you have any other means to verify the reliability of their claims?
Source, Left out	Who do they cite?
Independence, Motivation	Is the author affiliated with any of the authors they're citing?
Proximity, Independence, Logic	Are the cited authors part of a particular academic movement or school of thought?
Motivation, Logic, Left out	Look closely at the quotations and paraphrases from other sources:
Evidence, Logic	Did they appropriately represent the context of their cited sources?
Motivation, Logic, Left out	Did they ignore any important elements from their cited sources?
Independence, Motivation	Are they cherry-picking facts to support their own arguments?
Source, Evidence	Did they appropriately cite ideas that were not their own?