

How to Critically Analyze Books and Articles

Evaluating a source can begin even before you have the source in hand. You can appraise a source by first examining the *bibliographic citation*. A bibliographic citation is a written description of a book, periodical article, essay or some other published material. Bibliographic citations have three main components: author, title and publication information. These components can help you determine the usefulness of this source for your paper. If you forget how to read a bibliographic citation, ask a Reference Librarian in any Oberlin College Library.

Initial appraisal

Author's credentials

What are the author's credentials -- educational background, past writings, or experience -- in this area? Is the book or article written on a topic in the author's area of expertise? *Who's Who in American Art, Biography Index* (print & online), *Contemporary Authors* (print & online), biographies/resumes on credible web sites (e.g., academic web sites) or biographies located in the publication itself can be used to determine the author's credentials.

Check a catalog like *OBIS*, *OhioLINK*, *WorldCat* or *RLIN* to see if this is an area that the author has written about before. Try an appropriate periodical index (like *Art Abstracts*) to see any articles or reviews by your author. The more an author has written on a topic, the more confidence you can have in their publication.

Has your instructor mentioned the author? Have you seen the author's name cited in other sources or bibliographies? Respected authors are cited frequently by other scholars. For this reason, always note names that appear in many different sources.

Year of Publication

When was the work published? This date is often located on the title page below the name of the publisher. If it is not there, look for the copyright date on the reverse of the title page. Is the source current or out-of-date for your topic? Although resources in the humanities generally retain their importance as time passes, areas of rapid development, such as newly discovered artists or new interpretations, demand more current information.

Edition

Is this a first or later edition? Further editions indicate a source that has been revised and updated to reflect changes in knowledge, include omissions, and to harmonize with its intended readers' needs. Also, many printings or editions may indicate the work has become a standard source in the area and is therefore reliable.

For Books – The Publisher

Note the publisher. If the source is published by a university press it is probably scholarly. Although a reputable publisher does not necessarily guarantee quality, it should indicate the publisher had high regard for the source being published. Use the following sources to evaluate a publisher. Browsing the publisher's web site can also be informative:

- *Literary market place: LMP*. (Web: Search OBIS for the title *LMP online*; Print: Main Ref, PN 161 .L5)
- *International literary market place: ILMP*. (Web: Search OBIS for the title *LMP online*; Print: Main Ref, Z291.5 .I5)

For Periodicals

Is this periodical scholarly or popular? The distinction is important, since audience determines a periodical's level of complexity and intellectual sophistication. Intended audience will also affect the bias of articles and what subjects are covered. For brief evaluative descriptions of periodicals see Katz's *Magazines for Libraries* (Main Ref Z 6941 .M23) or the online version of *Ulrich's Periodicals Directory* (search OBIS for the title *ulrichs periodicals*). You may also want to check the *International directory of little magazines & small presses* (Main Ref. Z 6944 .L5 D5).

Content Analysis

Having made an initial appraisal, you should now examine the body of the source. Read the Preface to determine the author's intentions for the book. Scan the Table of Contents and the Index to get a broad overview of the material it covers. Note whether bibliographies are included. Read the chapters which specifically address your topic, or cover material you are already familiar with.

Intended Audience

What type of audience is the author addressing? Is the publication written for a specialized or a general audience? Is this source too elementary, too technical, too advanced, or just right for your needs?

Objective Reasoning

Is the information covered fact, opinion, or propaganda? It is not always easy to separate fact from opinion. Facts can usually be verified; opinions, though they may be based on factual information, evolve from the interpretation of facts. Skilled writers can make you think their interpretations are facts.

Does the information appear to be valid and well researched, or is it questionable and unsupported by evidence? Assumptions should be reasonable. Note errors or omissions. Is the author's point of view objective and impartial? Is the language free of emotion-rousing words and bias? Are there citations to the sources used throughout the text? Most reputable works will cite other authorities; works with few or no citations may be cutting edge research, or may be making suppositions not supported in the field. Likewise, scholarly publications should include a bibliography; a very brief or absent bibliography may indicate the author has not appropriately researched the topic.

Coverage

Does the work update other sources, substantiate other materials you have read, or add new information? Does it extensively or marginally cover your topic? You should explore enough sources to obtain a variety of viewpoints.

Is the material primary or secondary in nature? Primary sources are the raw material of the research process. Secondary sources are based on primary sources. Scholars use this primary material to help generate historical interpretations -- a secondary source. Books, encyclopedia articles, and scholarly journal articles *about* a subject would be considered secondary sources. Choose both primary and secondary sources when you have the opportunity.

Writing Style

Is this publication organized logically? Are the main points clearly presented? Do you find the text easy to read, or is it stilted or choppy? Is the author repetitive?

Evaluative Reviews

Locate critical reviews of books in periodical indexes, such as *Art Abstracts*, *Bibliography of the History of Art*, or the *Book Review Digest*. Is the review positive? Is the book under review considered a valuable contribution to the field? Does the reviewer mention other books that might be better? If so, locate these titles for more information on your topic. Do the various reviews agree on the value or attributes of the book or has it aroused controversy among the critics?