

Chapter Five

Evaluation of Your Sources

Why evaluate your sources?

Being an information literate historian is being able to distinguish quality research from substandard research. That task can be difficult when you aren't an expert in the field and have not spent your life studying a particular geographic area or period of history. As you research your topic, you will gain some knowledge that will help you discover the truly erroneous material. However, to be a critical, thinking researcher, you must examine your sources and reflect upon their accuracy, their value and their authority. Even if you know nothing about a subject, you can use the basic criteria listed below and employ some basic research techniques to look at your secondary research critically. (For evaluating your primary resources, see Chapter 6 on primary resources. For extra criteria to use in evaluating Internet resources see Chapter 7 on the Internet.)

Basic Evaluation Criteria

This list is an amalgamation of a number of commonly used evaluation criteria and not exclusive to history. Asking these questions will help you assess the value of your research.

- **Author authority:** Who is the author and what is his or her affiliation? Most journal articles and many books have biographical information on the author at the bottom of the first page or at the back of the book. Is the author from a reputable institution? Are they practicing in the area of history that they are writing? For instance is this person medical scholar writing medical history or are they doing textual criticism on medieval chants? In other words, why should you trust this scholar's authority? You can also look for other sources of biographical information on this individual. See Chapter 2 on reference resources for suggested biographical resources to find out more about your author. Ask your librarian for other sources. For books, you can also look for book reviews to see how the texts were received by other scholars. See Chapter 2 for sources on finding book reviews.
- **Audience and Purpose:** Understanding for whom the author wrote the text is important. Is it for other scholars, other practitioners, who will understand the same language and special terms? Can you as a new researcher recognize these terms? Even if you don't yet understand what they mean, you can understand that the text should contain such words and phrases as neo-colonialism, nihilism, or occ-centric. Can you tell by the language of the book or journal article, that the audience is a more general audience or an audience who must be familiar with the field of study? Will that be too general of

an audience for your research? Look for footnotes or some sort of documentation. See the section on footnotes and documentation below. The best way to understand an author's purpose is to read the introduction of a book or journal article. Usually the author spells out the purpose of the text quite clearly. Do you get what the author says you will get? If not, that could be a red flag that the research isn't the best of quality.


- **Accuracy and Completeness:** Since you have already had to plan out your search strategy to do your searching in your institution's online catalog as well as one or two periodical indexes, you already have an idea of the scope of your topic. Think about issues should be logically addressed by this work. Has the author covered all of the necessary topics? Any issue left out may be important to your topic and signal problems with the research. Certainly, it would indicate that you should look for other sources that might address this aspect of your topic.

- **Footnotes and Documentation:** Look at the footnotes and documentation. If there is little documentation in the form of charts, graphs, references to primary sources, you should look at the research with a very critical eye. Part of the purpose of research is to lay out what the researcher has found and include his or her

“proof” so that someone else may replicate and judge the results. In the case of the hard sciences, other scientists will replicate experiments. If you look at another historians research and believe their documentation is faulty, that may signal problems elsewhere in their research.

What is bias, Who is biased and so what?

Bias, in the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language is defined as a “ preference or an inclination, especially one that inhibits impartial judgment.”¹ No one likes to admit to bias in life or in research. After all, we want a fair society that reports news and research in a fair and unbiased manner. Yet, bias is part of life and part of research. When you formulate your research query, you do so with your 21st century sense of curiosity and knowledge. Even the best historians will allow and admit to bias in their research. An example of such bias is evident in the debate between two Nazi Germany scholars, Daniel Goldhagen and Christopher Browning. Goldhagen wrote a book titled, Hitler’s Willing Executioners based on batallion FILL THIS IN Browning used batallion FILL THIS IN and wrote a text, FILL THIS IN . Just by the two titles, it is evident that the two individuals have a very different interperitaiton of very similar evidence. While the debate has become quite heated and is more complicated than the bias we will talk about here, it

¹  The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition. Copyright 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Published by the Houghton Mifflin Company. Viewed 6/4/03

is evident that way in which these two scholars framed their question and investigation was influenced by their own perspective, their own bias. Goldhagen is not only of Jewish background, but also had family members killed in the holocaust. CHECK THIS. Browning served in Vietnam and has taken the obedient soldier's view. Neither book is sloppy research, both have bias. You as a historian and researcher must figure out what to do with this dilemma. You also must realize that research is never factual, always interpretive. This is why looking at and thinking about the uses of evidence is very critical to an information literate historian.

Scholarship or Propaganda

Another issue to watch out for in your research is information that intends to deceive or to sway opinion. Propaganda is defined as "the spreading of ideas, information, or rumor for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, a cause, or a person."² It uses half truths or takes truth out of context so that erroneous conclusions are drawn by those that users of propaganda seek to influence. Propaganda is not always evil, but you must recognize it for what it is. Below is a table that compares scholarship to propaganda.³ Check to make sure the research you find (and the research you produce) fits solidly in the scholarship column.

² Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary online

³ Sonia Bodi, "Scholarship or Propaganda: How can Librarians Help Undergraduates tell the Difference?" **Journal of Academic Librarianship**, 21 (Jan. 1995) 21-25, and Eileen Gambrill, Professor, School of Social Welfare, University of California at Berkeley, at the **Twelfth Annual International**

(see if could reprint Bodi's table at end of article. This is almost verbatim)

Scholarship	Propaganda
Strives for truth and admits weaknesses	Operates either many levels of both truth and falsehood
Presents other points of view and may include dissenting points of view	Presents one point of view as the only point of view
Attempts to be fair-minded and admits bias or point of view	Misleads deliberately
Interprets data carefully, whether it supports or refutes scholars premise	Manipulates charts, graphs, statistics to support a premise
Invites critical analysis	Provides ready-made answers and solutions to problems
Invites continuing research	Results in changed attitude and/or motivation to action to be successful
Rational approach	Emotional Appeal

Using solid, reliable research as a foundation for your research will enhance your papers and other projects and make you an information literate historian.

An Information Literate Historian knows that bias exists, recognizes propaganda and attempts to use and to produce the best available and least biased research. If you want your skills and your results to be taken seriously by your professors and other historians and researchers, it is important to know the quality of your sources and to use them wisely.

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