Three aspects of a source provide much of the information you need to evaluate its usefulness.

For an overview of related key topics on evaluating sources, visit the videos and quizzes in this tutorial.

Explore It

You can begin to determine a work’s relevance and usefulness by considering three things:

- **Author**  Find and evaluate the author’s credentials.
- **Date**  Locate the publication date.
- **Publisher or publication venue**  Find out what you can about the publication and its sponsor or publisher.

Finding and evaluating these elements in all potential sources—especially online sources—can take a bit of searching. But by weighing these aspects of a text you can swiftly determine a potential source’s usefulness. This evaluation can help you decide whether to keep or ignore a source.
For this article from a journal (the full text located using Questia), the page includes many elements that can be evaluated. The author’s name appears at the top of the article, but her credentials appear at the very bottom of the piece in a brief biographical note. The date of publication and name of the journal appear at the top of the piece and are repeated in a bibliographical entry after the article.
Learn It

Look over the following elements in the sources you collect. This kind of evaluation can help you tell whether a source will yield relevant, current, credible information that will help your research project. Ask questions about sources as you preview them to find out how suitable they will be.

**Author**
Does the author have an advanced degree or extensive publications in a field? Is the author’s work frequently cited by others? Look for evidence of the author’s expertise and interests.

**Date**
What is the publication date? How important is it to your research project that the date be current? Recent sources are often more useful, especially in disciplines where new discoveries and research are evolving.

**Publisher or publication venue**
Is the publisher (or sponsor of an online source) scholarly or commercial? Is the publisher a government, academic, or some other kind of organization? If the source is not from a scholarly publisher or organization, does the publisher seem credible and authoritative on your subject? Is it addressing a general or more specialized audience? Consider the publisher or sponsor’s credentials and motivation for publishing the text you found. Is the sponsor likely to present all the facts or only one side of an issue?

You may also want to read and evaluate other aspects of a potential source. Does the title include words that relate directly to your topic? Skim abstracts or overviews for articles or prefaces for books for an overview or summary of the source. Check the copyright page, table of contents, or homepage for information about the publisher. Check any bibliography included for whether the sources cited seem current and credible. Look briefly at any visuals, including tables, graphs, or other images, that can suggest headings or—in online sources—at links to determine how much detail the source includes and what source it’s citing to support its points.

Use It

Suppose that you are writing an academic paper on minimum wage laws in the United States. Read the brief descriptions of sources for the project below. Which of the following sources could you eliminate, based on its publication date? Which of these sources is the most general, based on where it is published, and would probably yield only a definition and overview?

**Web source**

**Book (from Questia)**

**Magazine article (from Questia)**
*Giving Workers Their Due*, by John Buell, *The Humanist*, July 1999

**Encyclopedia entry (from Questia)**
Newspaper article (from Questia)

Journal article (from Questia)

Based on its date of publication, the magazine article published in the 1990s could probably be eliminated. The currency of information about the minimum wage would no doubt be too dated if your purpose is to research and write about the minimum wage issues currently faced by workers.

Looking at the publishers and venues for the sources in this list, the encyclopedia entry is most likely to yield only a definition and overview of the topic. This overview might be quite useful early on in a project, providing background and factual information as you begin research. Although this article is from an authoritative general reference (*The Columbia Encyclopedia*), for most assignments in college this reference is too general to cite in your final research paper.

Optional Activity

Skim the sources you have collected so far for a current research project. Review what you know about each of the authors, dates of publication, and publisher or sponsor information. Then identify which of these sources, if any, has publication information that causes you to question its credibility or usefulness. Explain why.