

Assessing and Evaluating Sources

A comprehensive approach to assessing and evaluating sources entails skimming, lateral reading, evaluating through close reading, and rhetorical listening.

Mike Palmquist, Colorado State University and author of *Joining the Conversation*, *In Conversation*, and *The Bedford Researcher*

This whitepaper has been adapted from an original presentation by Mike Palmquist for Macmillan Learning.

Introduction

At a time when it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish among facts, “alternative facts,” and “fake news,” it’s more critical than ever for writers to assess and evaluate sources.

As I began to work on textbooks, I came across websites that initially looked authoritative, but quickly revealed an agenda and often contained patently false information. And in recent years, such websites and other digital sources have gotten more sophisticated in how they mask their agendas. Not surprisingly, students are asking, “*How can I tell if this is a good source?*” and “*How can I work with it—or not—in a way that’s most appropriate for my writing situation?*”

From this experience, I’ve come up with **four strategies for assessing and evaluating sources:**

- » Assess Connections to Your Conversation
- » Read Laterally to Assess Credibility and Fit
- » Read Closely to Evaluate the Source
- » Engage in Rhetorical Listening

Each of these strategies builds on writers’ understanding of concepts such as the differences between disinformation versus misinformation, the biases of authors and publishers, the lure of new information, and the dangers of “information bubbles.”



Author and Publisher Biases and Agendas

In addition to these terms, students need to understand author and publisher biases and agendas. *Bias* refers to our tendency to view something from a particular perspective. The biases of authors are shaped in large part by their interests, experiences, values, and beliefs, while the biases of publishers have more complex sources, including the mission of the publication, the biases of its owners and employees, and the perspectives of the authors it publishes.

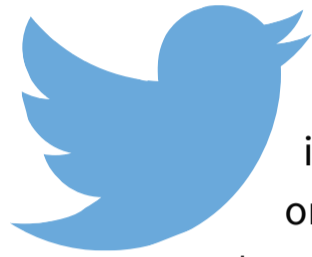
While many news organizations claim to be fact-based, fair, and balanced—or some variant of that theme—their coverage of major events and issues can vary significantly. Understanding tendencies among news organizations—and by extension the newspapers, magazines, journals, websites, and social media they produce—can help students avoid uncritical acceptance of how issues are framed, how facts are presented (or not), and how differing perspectives are considered (or not). As writers, if we get too comfortable receiving information that only takes us in one particular direction, that can become problematic. If we are constantly relying on the same type of information, we need to understand the perspective held by the people that are providing us with that information. Students must take this into account as they begin evaluating sources.



GoodIdeas/Shutterstock



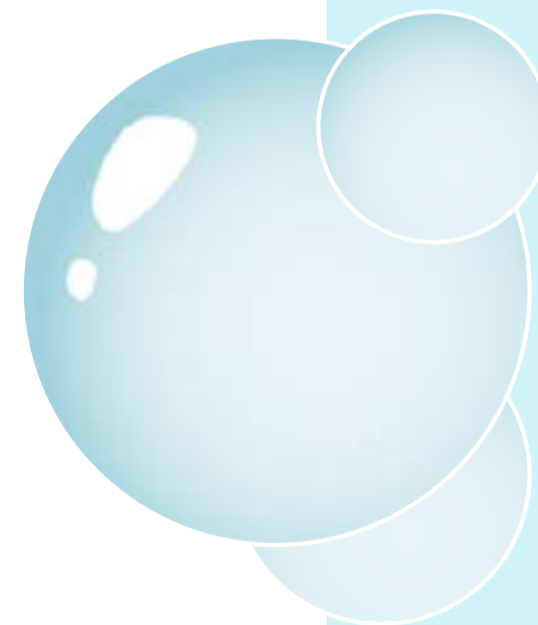
The Lure of New and Exciting Information



A report by Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (*Science*, 2018) looked at 126,000 rumors circulating on Twitter over ten years. The study showed that false information spread far more widely than factual information, with up to one hundred times more people seeing rumor-based tweets than fact-based tweets. This is just one example of many studies that have been conducted on this topic. This study highlights the ways in which readers tend to resonate emotionally with information that aligns with their biases, and then shows how that information becomes widely spread and part of the accepted understanding of an issue.

The Impact of Information Bubbles

Many of us have the tendency to become comfortable with receiving information from the same set of sources. It's important to remind ourselves to be skeptical of those sources. We need to ask ourselves *where are they coming from* and *what are they doing*. Even if we disagree with a particular source, it's important for us and for our students to *seek alternative perspectives* and think about *consuming news differently*.



How to Assess Sources

An Expanded Approach combines the elements discussed above with the conversation metaphor, which involves students listening to others who are involved in debate and discussion about an issue and then taking a moment to reflect on how they can best join that conversation. In short, here are the four things students should be doing as they assess and evaluate their sources:

1. Assess Connections to Your Conversation

The first question students should ask themselves is whether or not a source is relevant to the conversation they want to join. It should be quick—skimming is the key reading strategy at this stage. This is a quick (2-3 minute) decision where students question if this source is relevant to their topic. Avoid making this a complex process where students need to study the text carefully and take 20 minutes to evaluate a source.



GettyImages



2. Read Laterally to Assess Credibility and Fit

The second step involves “lateral reading” (a concept developed by researchers Sam Wineburg and Sarah McGrew), which is based on what fact-checkers do to assess a claim. It involves examining how the information, ideas, and arguments in a source fit within the larger conversation about an issue. Lateral reading reflects the image of having related tabs open in a browser window. Key moves here are seeking information about the authors and publishers, following links, and conducting additional searches. This process should take no more than 5-10 minutes (based primarily on the complexity of the article).

Lateral reading relates to lateral thinking: looking at things from different perspectives. Students should be asking themselves: *How do these sources address the same issue?* By the end of this process, students will likely have determined whether or not their source is relevant and should be assessing how it fits within the larger conversation of their topic.

3. Read Closely to Evaluate the Source

Now that students have determined the quick-scan relevancy of the source and have determined that it plays a role in their larger conversation, they can begin looking closely at their sources. Elements that students should be closely considering include:

- » Relevance
- » Evidence
- » Author
- » Publisher
- » Timeliness
- » Comprehensiveness
- » Genre



Shutterstock



4. Engage in Rhetorical Listening

The final stage in evaluating and assessing a source is engaging in rhetorical listening. In this stage, students should be asking themselves: *Does the content from this source suggest a potential change in my stance on this issue or topic?*

To make this determination, students can engage in collaborative conversations and understand that not every situation needs to be defined by strict agreement or disagreement. Here are resources for rhetorical listening:

- » Wayne Booth's "Listening Rhetoric" in *The Rhetoric of Rhetoric: The Quest for Effective Communication*
- » Krista Ratcliffe's "Rhetorical Listening" with its focus on gender, race, ethnicity, and culture
- » Sonja Foss' "Invitational Rhetoric" (Co-developed with colleague Cindy Griffin)
- » Cheryl Glenn's "Rhetoric of Silence" with its grounding in gender and race



**Mike Palmquist**

Mike Palmquist is professor and university distinguished teaching scholar at Colorado State University. He is recognized nationally for his work in writing across the curriculum, computer-supported writing instruction, and new approaches to scholarly publishing. He is the founding editor and publisher of the WAC Clearinghouse (<http://wac.colostate.edu>), the leading site for supporting scholarly exchange about communication across the curriculum.

He is the author of numerous articles and essays on writing and teaching with technology and writing across the curriculum. In 2004, he received the Charles Moran Award for Distinguished Contributions to the Field, which recognizes “exemplary scholarship and professional service to the field of computers and writing.” In 2006, the CCCC Committee on Computers in Composition and Communication named him Outstanding Technology Innovator. In 2021, he was named a distinguished fellow of the Association for Writing Across the Curriculum. From 2009 to 2011, he served on the Executive Committee of the National Council of Teachers of English and as chair of the NCTE’s College Section. He is the author of *Joining the Conversation: A Guide and Handbook for Writers*, Fifth Edition (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2023); *In Conversation*, Third Edition (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2023) and *The Bedford Researcher*, Seventh Edition (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2021).

[Watch the full recording.](#)

[Contact your local Macmillan Learning representative.](#)