

Writing Center

Working with Sources

Evaluating Source Material

Critical reading refers to more than just reading a source; it also means reacting to and evaluating that source. The key to developing critical reading is to ask the following questions that focus attention on higher levels of thinking – analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Type of Publication

Textbook material can usually be accepted as reliable and well researched; however, not all other sources are so trustworthy. Not all sources are equal in their levels of detail and technical accuracy. For example, an article published in the *National Enquirer* is less reliable than an article published in *Time* magazine. However, an article on heart disease published in *Time* would have less detail and analysis than an article on the same topic from *The New England Journal of Medicine*.

How can material from an unfamiliar periodical be evaluated? Look for evidence that the author used other reliable sources to compile his or her article by examining footnotes, endnotes, and bibliographies or works cited pages. Verify the information by checking additional sources, or ask a librarian for assistance,

Author's qualification

If the author lacks experience or expertise with the subject, the material he or she produces may be suspect. In books, the author's credentials are usually stated in the preface or on the book jacket; however, when using periodicals, you generally have to rely on the editor's or publisher's judgment to assess an author's reliability. For Internet sites, examine the web address and check the bottom of the last page for the author's qualifications.

Material – fact or opinion?

In trying to decide whether material is fact or opinion, always remember that facts are immediately verifiable whereas opinions involve a judgment, prediction, and/or evaluation.

Author's purpose

Discover the author's purpose by using following rules:

- Consider the source and intended purpose. Is the periodical intended for a general purpose audience (*Time* or *Newsweek*) or a specialized audience (*Teaching English in the Two Year College* or *Journal of Nursing*)? Look at the word choice, level of language, complexity of ideas, and arguments the writer uses – these will often indicate the audience the writer has in mind.
- Consider the point of view. This refers to the way an author looks at or approaches his or her subject.
- Decide whether the writer tries to prove anything about the subject.

Author bias

Bias refers to an author's partiality, inclination toward a particular viewpoint, or prejudice. Check for bias by paying attention to emotional and descriptive language and ascertaining if opposing viewpoints are presented fairly or at all.

Tone

An author's tone is achieved primarily through word choice and stylistic features such as sentence patterns and length. An author's tone will reveal his or her feelings about a topic and often indicates bias.

Using Source Material in your Writing

Source material can be used in one of three ways in your writing: direct quotations, summaries, and paraphrases. The individual characteristics of each are as follows:

Quotation	Summary	Paraphrase
Match the source document <i>word for word</i>	Restate in your own words <i>only the main ideas</i> of the source	Restate in your own words <i>the main ideas and important details</i> of the source

Why should I use quotations, summaries and paraphrases?

Quotations, summaries and paraphrases are generally used to:

- Provide support for your assertions
- Add credibility to your writing
- Provide specific examples to illustrate a point
- Call attention to a position with which you want to disagree or agree

When do I use quotations, summaries and/or paraphrases?

Quote only when an author expresses a point in particularly original or effective language. Be careful not to use quotations too much.

Summarize when you are restating an entire argument or presenting chunks of information.

Paraphrase when you want to add detail to a source's argument, or when the source uses a particularly vivid or appropriate example. Use when the original ideas are noteworthy, but the original words do not merit direct quotation.

How do I summarize source material?

1. Read through the material once.
2. Read through the selection again, but this time underline or highlight the main ideas. Circle any unfamiliar words and find out their definitions.
3. Write down the main ideas of the article without looking at the original.
4. Check your work for accuracy and completeness.

How do I paraphrase source material?

1. Read through the material once.
2. Find synonyms for words in the original. Look up any words you do not know.
3. Write down a paraphrase of the original without looking at the original.
4. Check to make sure that you have kept nearly all the ideas of the original and the meaning of the original.
5. Be sure NOT to use the vocabulary of the original OR the sentence structure of the original.

Guidelines for Effective Paraphrasing

1. Place the information in a new order with different sentence structure.
2. Break the complex ideas into small units.
3. Use concrete, direct vocabulary in place of technical jargon.
4. Use synonyms for words in the source.
5. Accompany each important fact or idea in your notes with source page number.

Guidelines for Effective Summarizing

1. Identify the main points as you read the source.
2. Put those main ideas into your own words.
3. Keep the summary shorter than the original.
4. Be objective rather than interpreting or judging source ideas.
5. Provide proper documentation for the source.

Sources: College Reading and Study Skills, 7th edition, Kathleen T. McWhorter, Longman Publishers, New York, 1998, 99.214-22 and The New Century Handbook, Christine Hult and Thomas Huckin, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 2001.