In this last video, let’s recap what we’ve learned in the 4-step strategy for online source evaluation.

For the first step, we discussed checking and identifying some quality indicators of the sources:

Check the URL and domain name to see if the source is recognizable or reputable.

Check the date to not only find when the article is written but also what time period is covered.

Identify whether the author is a person or an organization.

Check the about page and see if they tell us more about who they are.

Scan the content and see if there are links or citations to other sources and determine if it is linked to an internal source or an external source.

Lastly, take an overall look at the website and see how the layout works for us. Does the website help us understand the content or does it contain too many distractions?

If the source passes this quick first impression check, we will take the second step to further investigate the source and gather more evidence for the quality assessment using the CRAAP test.

First, we can evaluate if the source is current and up-to-date for our research topic and check if more current information is available. Then we assess if the content is relevant to our topic, sub-topic, or a specific viewpoint and if the source is appropriate to be used for research purposes. Third, we can investigate if the author has the education or experience that makes them an expert on this topic. And further, we can assess the accuracy of the content and see if the links or citations tell us where the information comes from and if we can verify it with these sources. Also, we can check if the article is under peer-review or editorial review, which makes the source more trustworthy. Finally, we can use the information from the about page to understand the purpose of the website and find out the potential biases of the source.

After the second step of evaluating sources with the CRAAP test, we need to further evaluate sources through the third step - critical thinking and lateral reading. We are going to consult a variety of sources on the topic and compare different perspectives. We will take a closer look at the evidence and see how strong the evidence is. The evidence that is based on research is more reliable than the evidence that is based on anecdotes and selective personal stories. Research based on reliable and valid research methods provides strong evidence. We can further check who funds the research and what their views or interests are to assess potential biases. Besides the evidence, we need to check the reasoning of the argument and see if the evidence can logically support the conclusions or if it contains any overgeneralizations or other fallacies. Finally, we can use some evidence tracking techniques to follow upstream and downstream sources to gather all evidence and see if we can reconcile the differences and form our own opinions.

In the last step of source evaluation, we will apply reflective practices to critically think about our own biases and assumptions. Here is what we can do:

Pierce the filter bubbles: we can reflect if our online experience has created an information habitat that surrounds us with similar views and shelters us from opposing beliefs. If so, we can take some actions to get us out of the filter bubble. We can use different search terms or ask opposite questions to get to the other side of the story.

Examine our own biases. Confirmation bias, similarity bias, and anchoring bias are very common. In the process of source evaluation, we can take a moment to stop and reflect if we have brought such biases into our source selection. Ask “did I favor this source because it affirms my belief? Did I weigh the reasons from both sides?”

Climb down the ladder of inference: besides biases, we also have other cognitive limitations that prevent us from forming objective and reliable views. The ladder of inference concept asks us to look at our own assumptions and interpretations. We can climb down the ladder of inference by asking questions such as “Did I add personal or cultural meaning to understand the content? Are my assumptions or prior knowledge questionable? Did I come to the conclusion too quickly?”

Practice what we learn: we have learned so many source evaluation skills, but we can not really master these skills until we put them into practice in real life and develop the habits of mind. We need to be aware of our own biases and cognitive limitations and keep an open mind when forming beliefs. We need to realize that a simple fact can be disruptive and it is important to suspend our judgment until we see the big picture.

This concludes our learning module of the 4-step strategy for online source evaluation. Hopefully, this has enhanced our evaluation skills and will help us make better decisions using sources we find online.