

# Determining the Relevance and Reliability of Information Sources

*Students critically evaluate information sources for relevance and reliability by evaluating, with their peers, sample sources of information for a given topic.*

## CONCEPT IN CONTEXT

This lesson provides beginning students with a checklist to get them thinking critically about information's origins, purpose, and complexity, but takes them into a deeper discussion about how to apply those evaluative criteria. Students struggle with the idea that both relevance and reliability of information are contextual and related to the information need at hand. They need to understand that voices of authority are not appointed but get their status from context. Information that is appropriate in one research situation will not necessarily work for another. Reliability and relevance are not mutually exclusive, nor are they totally dependent on one another; they are context-driven, and engaging students in conversation encourages them to develop an appreciation of the importance of the situation. As fits a lesson on context, it is not scripted, and the librarian must be prepared to stray from the lesson plan or answer unexpected questions.

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**Level:** Basic

**Estimated Time:** 50–75 minutes

## MATERIALS NEEDED

- In preparation for the class, the librarian selects a variety of resources that are related to the class's sample research topic. The topic can be developed by the librarian or suggested by the instructor. These resources should be a mix of scholarly journal articles, magazine or newspaper articles, blog posts, and general web content that are relevant and/or reliable sources.
- Access to a computer and links to previously selected articles to be evaluated.

- Links to the articles can be embedded in the class Blackboard site, provided in a Google Doc, or given to students on the board, etc. This exercise can be adapted for classes with no computer access by providing students with paper copies of the sources to be evaluated.
- Handout with a checklist to assist students in determining a source's relevance and reliability (*see Appendix or [www.ala.org/acrl/files/handouts.pdf](http://www.ala.org/acrl/files/handouts.pdf)*)

## LEARNING GOALS

- Students will be able to differentiate between reliability and relevance of information.
- Students will understand the relationship between reliability and relevance.
- Students will use this understanding to select appropriate resources for their research topic.

## ANTICIPATORY SET

Librarian Script:

Imagine you have just moved to town and you are looking for a doctor for a physical. Your options are:

- An internationally known, award-winning podiatrist who specializes in foot fungus
- A general practitioner in town who is affordable; he has recently been investigated for Medicare fraud
- Your aunt's best friend's general practitioner, who has been rated highly online
- Who do you choose? Why?

The students are likely to choose the third doctor, but the librarian helps students understand *why*. The best choice is relevant, reliable, and contextual.

## LESSON OBJECTIVE STATED

Librarian Script: “Today we are going to look at sources of information to determine if they are appropriate for the research topic that we are using in class today. You will learn how to evaluate them according to relevance, reliability, and the context in which they are used.”

## INPUT/MODELING

The librarian leads the class in a discussion of a short article on a research topic using the following criteria. The librarian points out the importance of context for determining both.

Reliable:

- Is the author qualified to write about the topic? (Look at her or his credentials, experience, or organizational affiliations.)
- Does the URL reveal anything about the author or source?
- Is the author trying to sell something?
- Does the source reveal a bias?
- Is the information factual?
- Are there spelling, grammar or other typographical errors?
- Is the information current?

Relevant:

- Does the information relate to your topic or answer your question?
- Does the source meet the requirements of your assignment?
- Is the information at an appropriate level (not too elementary or advanced for your needs)?

## GUIDED PRACTICE/CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

The librarian divides the class into groups, and each group is assigned a source to read. Students skim their source and consider reliability and relevance in the context of their research using the above-listed criteria. Each group reports their findings to the class. This is an opportunity for the librarian to clarify “muddy” points and misperceptions and emphasize areas of importance. A discussion on popular and scholarly articles is appropriate in this lesson, as well.

## **INDEPENDENT PRACTICE**

If there is time at the end of the class, students can search the library's databases or discovery tool to find one reliable and relevant source for their research assignment.

## **METHODS OF ASSESSMENT**

The librarian can assess through the class discussion of relevancy and reliability of each source. Possibly, the librarian can evaluate student bibliographies. Student learning can be assessed by evaluating the students' bibliographies for the relevance and reliability of the sources they used in their research assignment.