

## Evaluating Sources II: External Indices of Significance

There are several ways to evaluate the significance of a source: investigating the author and the publication, determining how other authors have used the source, and researching the historical context of the sources.

### Author

#### What should I find out about the author?

Find out what organizations or groups have funded the scholar in the past, any relevant past employment or institutional affiliations, and whether the author has published other relevant articles or books.

For instance, an ethnobotanist's writings about the conservation of rainforest plants while working for a pharmaceutical company should not be dismissed as biased, but it does provide context to his or her claims.

Alternatively, an author making a controversial claim who has a long track record of contributing widely cited articles to a field or to a scholarly conversation may encourage more careful consideration.

#### Keep in Mind

The article may include a funding, acknowledgements, or conflict-of-interest statement. If so, spend some time using *Google* to explore the funding. However, not all journals require such statements and those statements do not necessarily exhaust the ways that institutional affiliations, employment, and past funding can shape an author's perspective.

### The Journal

#### What should I find out about the journal?

Use a web search engine to find out who sponsors the journal. Many journals are overseen by groups with defined ideological, political, or material stakes in specific perspectives. Other journals are published by academic or professional organizations.

For instance, an article about labor history is published in a journal funded by a libertarian think tank should not be dismissed as biased. However, understanding the mission of a journal is important when evaluating the claims in the article and knowing more about these sponsoring bodies will lead to a better understanding of the intended audience.

#### Keep in Mind

Elsevier, Wiley-Blackwell, Springer, Taylor-Francis, Sage, Ingenta, and Nature-Publishing Group are publishing companies. While the control of a few publishing companies over academic publishing is a topic of debate, it is not particularly important to the content of most articles. Sponsoring organizations are generally more important to identify.

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### Reputability

#### How can I tell if the article was published in a reputable journal?

Some journals are more reputable than others. In fact, some journals are rarely read or cited by scholars and serve primarily as a way for young scholars and/or graduate students to inflate their credentials.

To determine if a journal is reputable, look at the *Journal Citation Reports (JCR)* database. If the journal is included in *JCR*, compare the impact factor, journal rank, and/or eigenfactor of this journal to other journals in the field.

#### Keep in Mind

If the journal you are looking for is not included in *JCR*, you can try to google its title to find out more about it. Journal associations with national or international academic organizations are generally more important than those associated with regional organizations, single universities, or graduate programs.

### Impact

#### How can I tell if an article has been important to other scholars?

Check to see if an article has been used as a source by other high-quality scholarly articles published in peer reviewed journals to get a sense of how important an article has been in a specific scholarly conversation. These articles can sometimes help identify limitations of a source, either because another scholar approaches a similar question differently or because the scholar explicitly criticizes the source. Perhaps most importantly, this practice can also help discover new sources related to a topic.

#### Keep in Mind

It is tempting to begin citation tracking with *Google Scholar* because it has very broad coverage. Unfortunately, this is also a liability; too many sources of low quality occur in the search results. For this reason, it is usually better to begin with *Web of Science*.

#### How do I find other sources that have cited an article?

To find articles which cite a source:

- Begin by looking in *Web of Science* for citations in top tier journals.
- Then look for citations in a larger pool of journals and other periodicals using the **Cited by** feature on *Google Scholar*.
- Note that some databases include more limited citation information, such as EBSCO databases (including *Academic Search Complete*), *JSTOR*, *PubMed*, and *PsycINFO*.

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### Context

#### Is there anything else I should find out about the article?

It is often a good idea to find out more about the context in which the article was published in order to assess and compare competing claims and perspectives.

#### What should I learn about the context?

It is a good idea to put an article in historical context by considering its date of publication.

- Consider the broader social, political, economic, or cultural context. Were there events or developments that would affect the research design or the reception of the article?
- Consider the narrower scholarly context. Which important articles in the field were published before or after this one? Are there any trends in the literature published around this date? Were other scholars looking at similar questions at this time using similar methods or theories?

### Keep in Mind

While it is very important to research and analyze the author, journal, and context, be sure that this process does not prevent you from carefully reading, analyzing, and evaluating the underlying source itself.