

## Evaluating Sources: TRAP

**Should I question the value of the information I find in reference and research sources?**

Yes! You should *always* carefully evaluate a source – no matter how reliable it seems to be – before using it for your research.

Use a **TRAP** (Timeliness, Reliability, Authority, and Purpose) to evaluate materials for quality:

- **TIMELINESS** - When you use material for your research, note its date of publication. Is the information up-to-date for the subject? Be especially aware of the publication date for material relating to technology, the sciences, or medicine. These fields develop so rapidly that even sources just two years old may be out of date.

However, remember that some topics, especially those in the humanities, rely on historic materials. Often these can be used as primary sources to document how an event, issue, or work has been addressed over time. Some material that may seem out-of-date may be of value, historically, to your work.

- **RELIABILITY** – Is the resource from a trustworthy source? One clue is to look for a bibliography, list of citations or footnotes within the document. It's a sign of quality, as it is in all research, and will often lead you to other resources on your subject.

Also, is the information free from errors? You should verify facts, dates, data, and spelling of terms and names in more than one source. Are statistics presented with identified sources? All data should be backed up with a citation showing the original source of the material. Look for evidence of quality control and careful editing.

- **AUTHORITY** – Look for the author or editor's name, and try to identify his/her credentials. Try to determine if the author is a well-known scholar in his/her respective field. Has s/he written other materials? Is s/he from an academic or other reputable organization? Is their education, training, and experience in the field relevant to the information being provided?

- **PURPOSE** – Think about why the document was created and if the information is presented in a neutral way. Is the work trying to sell, advocate, or educate about a topic? There should be a minimum level of bias in the work. You should be wary of material that seems to be trying to sway the reader's opinion – look for moderateness, objectivity, and fairness.

Also, consider the intended audience. Who was the material written or created for? This may give you insight into why the material may be presented in a certain way.

