APA STYLE

7th edition

# Evaluating Online Sources Activity

The internet is full of *clickbait*—words or phrases used to draw your attention and encourage you to click on a work—as well as misleading information. So, how can you separate the clickbait and misleading and harmful sources from the helpful ones? How do you choose trustworthy sources?

This two-part activity will help you determine whether an online source is worth citing in your paper.

## Part 1: Evaluate Source Origin



With a source in mind, write your answers to the following questions in a separate document.

The answers will help you determine whether to read the source and cite it in your paper.

1. Where did you find your source online? Common options: Google search, academic research database such as ERIC or APA PsycNet, or artificial intelligence (AI) tools. Write where you found the work in your notes.

2. What is the title of the work? Write it in your notes to identify the work for yourself.

3. What kind of work is it? Many kinds of works are available online, including journal articles, news articles, magazine articles, blog posts, reports, books, and more. Any kind of source can be cited in an APA Style paper, but different kinds of works undergo different levels of review before being published, and sources that have undergone expert review are more trustworthy than those that have not. Write the source type in your notes.

4. Does the title include clickbait? Remember that clickbait makes a work seem irresistible. Look for words like "must-see," "incredible," or "secret" and phrases like "Why you should," any numeral-related language ("3 things to know about"), or "Here's what really happened." List any of the words or phrases that you categorize as clickbait. Keep track of these terms to evaluate sources in the future.

5. Learn more about the author of the work. Do a quick search of their background to see what credentials or qualifications they have—Is this person an expert? How much have they written about this topic? It is a good sign for a work to be written by an established, respected author. Describe the author's credentials in your notes.

6. If the author uses clickbait (including misleading, sensational, or over-the-top claims), has questionable or no credentials, and has not published many works on the topic you are researching, then find another work and repeat the previous steps.

7. If the author does not use clickbait, has good credentials, and has published many works on the topic you are researching in credible publications (i.e., those with a good reputation in the publishing industry; feel free to do an internet search to check the background of the publications), then read the introduction (or first few paragraphs) of the work. If the work has an abstract (e.g., a journal article), read that too.

8. Now that you have read the introduction (or first few paragraphs and/or abstract), decide whether the work is relevant to the topic you are researching. Describe how it is relevant in your notes. If the work is not a good fit for your topic, find another work and repeat the previous steps.

9. If the work is relevant to your research, proceed to Part 2 of this activity.

## Part 2: Deeper Dive—Avoiding Plagiarism, Misinformation, Disinformation, and Malinformation



The sources you include in your work should not use inaccurate information.

To ensure you use trustworthy sources, evaluate each source for plagiarism, misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation using the following definitions and questions.

1. *Plagiarism* is the act of presenting information without attribution. Have the sources you plan to use in your work appropriately credited the sources they used in their work? Check your sources to ensure that references have been cited in the text and that any quotations, tables, figures, and/or images from other sources have been appropriately credited. (To learn more about plagiarism and how to avoid it, review our Avoiding Plagiarism Guide, available on the Handouts and Guides page of the APA Style website.) Describe any issues you notice in your notes.

2. *Misinformation* occurs when significant mistakes appear in information or citations without the intent to harm readers with said information. Fact-check the sources your sources cited in their work by looking up those sources. Did your sources accurately reflect what their sources said on the matter under discussion? Describe what you discovered in your notes.

3. *Disinformation* is the act of using inappropriate sources that are not credible. Do your sources use information that may deceive readers because the material is presented in a manner that shows it is inaccurate or biased/one-sided in nature? Check your sources to confirm that the tone is professional, the facts and claims have in-text citations/are credited to sources, and the references are legitimate and reliable. Write any impressions in your notes.

4. *Malinformation* is the act of distorting information to intentionally mislead or manipulate readers, which could cause harm; it may even involve fabricating sources or information. Do you see any indication that the work was written by AI or a third-party affiliate? Do you see any notes about the work being updated because it included incorrect information in its initial publication, and if so, is that information clearly labeled and the error corrected? Do you see any information that you suspect is false or a mischaracterization because of your own prior knowledge of the issue or from your own fact-checking of the information?

   Again, check your sources to confirm that the tone is professional, the facts and claims have in-text citations/are credited to sources, and the references are legitimate and reliable. Write any impressions in your notes.

5. Would you label any of your source material as plagiarism, misinformation, disinformation, or malinformation? If yes, find new sources to replace the sources that did not meet the requirements of this evaluation and repeat the directions from Parts 1 and 2 of this activity.

6. Before you start writing your paper, did you double-check with the individual who will assess your work to ensure the online sources you chose are okay to use? Although APA does not have rules about what source types are acceptable, instructors may have preferences, such as citing only peer-reviewed academic literature.

## If your sources passed this evaluation, congratulations!

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More information on APA Style can be found in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th ed.) and the *Concise Guide to APA Style* (7th ed.).

CITE THIS HANDOUT:
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