

16c Evaluate a source's usefulness and credibility.

Since you want the information and ideas you glean from sources to be reliable and persuasive, you must evaluate each potential source carefully. The following guidelines can help you assess the usefulness and credibility of sources you are considering:

- **Your purpose.** What will this source add to your research project? Does it help you support a major point, demonstrate that you have thoroughly researched your topic, or help establish your own credibility?
- **Relevance.** How closely related is the source to the narrowed topic you are pursuing?
- **Level of specialization and audience.** General sources can be helpful as you begin your research, but you may then need the authority or currency of more specialized sources. On the other hand, extremely specialized works may be very hard to understand. Who was the source originally written for — the general public? experts in the field? advocates or opponents? How does this fit with your concept of your own audience?

- **Credentials of the publisher or sponsor.** What can you learn about the publisher or sponsor of the source you are using? For example, is it a newspaper known for integrity, or is it a tabloid? Is it a popular source, or is it sponsored by a professional organization or academic institution? If you're evaluating a book, is the publisher one you recognize or can find described on its own Web site?
- **Credentials of the author.** Note names that come up from one source to another, since they may indicate that the author is influential in the field. An author's credentials may also be presented in the article, book, or Web site, or you can search the Internet for information about the author.
- **Date of publication.** Recent sources are often more useful than older ones, particularly in the sciences or other fields that change rapidly. However, in some fields — such as the humanities — the most authoritative works may be older ones. The publication dates of Internet sites can often be difficult to pin down. And even for sites that include dates of posting, remember that the material posted may have been composed some time earlier.
- **Accuracy of the source.** How accurate and complete is the information in the source? How thorough is the bibliography or list of works cited that accompanies the source? Can you find other sources that corroborate what your source is saying?
- **Stance of the source.** Identify the source's point of view or rhetorical stance, and scrutinize it carefully. Does the source present facts, or does it interpret or evaluate them? If it presents facts, what is included and what is omitted, and why? If it interprets or evaluates information that is not disputed, the source's stance may be obvious, but at other times, you will need to think carefully about the source's goals (16d). What does the author or sponsoring group want — to convince you of an idea? sell you something? call you to action in some way?
- **Cross-references to the source.** Is the source cited in other works? If you see your source cited by others, notice how they cite it and what they say about it to find additional clues to its credibility.

For more on evaluating Web sources and periodical articles, see the source maps on pp. 172–75 and 178–79.

16d Read critically and interpret sources.

Reading with a critical eye can make your research process more efficient. Use the tips on p. 109 to guide your critical reading.