

VI. *Evaluating Research Sources*

A. *Knowing Whether or Not Information is Reliable*

Now that you have finished a major part of the research process in gathering your resources, you are ready for the next step in your project: evaluating your sources for their usefulness, quality and authoritativeness. As nurses, learning to think critically will not only help you in the research process, but also in being able to assess situations which will come up in your career as a health care professional. When evaluating your sources in the Nursing field, the following ten criteria should be applied:

1. *Writer's Qualifications and/or Credentials*

To ensure that the information you retrieve is authoritative, the author should be regarded not only as a practitioner in the nursing and/or medical field, but also as an expert or authority. Another thing to keep in mind is the number of books he/she has written on the topic. Finally, you should try to determine how many times the writer has been cited or referred to in the literature. This can be determined partly by looking at the reference pages in the back pages of the articles you retrieve.

2. *Information Timely and/or Current*

Unless you are researching your topic from a historical perspective, the resources you retrieve need to be as current as possible, especially since advancements are occurring in the nursing and medical professions at an ever-increasing rate. In evaluating your resources for currency, the following considerations need to be taken into account:

- Is your information timely or out-of-date?
- Have you checked the publication dates for currency?
- How often, if at all, is the information updated?
- Are the sources you retrieved still valid for your topic?

3. *Resources Accurate and Factual Supported by Evidence*

Another factor to keep in mind when you evaluate your resources is whether or not the resources you retrieve are reliable or authoritative. You can determine an article's reliability by looking at the following factors:

- Does the information you have retrieved come from authoritative or reliable sources?
- If you retrieved the article from a journal in a database, is the journal refereed or peer-reviewed?
Note: Peer reviewed or refereed journals are publications which contain articles that have been reviewed by experts in the field.
- If using a book as your source, has it been reviewed?
- How thorough was the editing and review process in the article or articles you have retrieved?
- If a web site is used as a source, how stable or permanent is the information contained within it? Unfortunately, some web sites are here today and gone tomorrow.
- How complete is your source in covering the topic? In order to investigate completeness, you might want to check the table of contents, index, abstract or summary of the particular source.
- Are factual statements contained within the article well-documented or footnoted so that they may be verified for accuracy?

4. *Primary and Secondary Sources*

In exploring information concerning your topic, you will find there are two types of resources: *Primary and Secondary*.

- **Primary Sources:** These are sources which have not been evaluated, reviewed, analyzed, or critiqued. Examples would include newspaper articles; statistics, such as the *Mortality and Morbidity Report*; diaries; journals; patient care charts; reports; autobiographies; and others.

- **Secondary Sources:** These sources are the ones which analyze, review, evaluate, discuss, or critique findings and/or information found in primary sources. Examples would include articles from peer-reviewed or scholarly journals.

5. *Publisher's Reputation*

This factor is crucial to making sure the information you gather is from a reliable source. Although the publisher's reputation doesn't always guarantee quality, this factor could be a clue that the publishing firm has high standards for the works it publishes. Examples of scholarly publishing firms for nursing and related areas would include **Jones & Bartlett, W. B. Saunders, Springer, Elsevier, Sage, Blackwell, and John S. Wiley and Sons.**

6. *Type of Publication*

When evaluating the sources you included in your research, you need to determine whether they are scholarly, popular, trade or government publication. This factor is important because it will determine the level of complexity at which any given topic is explored.

- **Scholarly journals:** *Webster's Third International Dictionary* defines a scholarly journal as a publication which concerns itself with academic study and research; which exhibits scholarly methods and attitudes; and has the manner and appearance of a scholar. These publications usually include the following characteristics:
 - Contain graphs, charts, and statistical information
 - Resources used are cited in footnotes and/or bibliographies.
 - Lists writers' credentials.
 - Authors are experts and/or scholars in the field, or have done considerable research in the field.
 - Language used is related to that particular discipline's vernacular.
 - Reports on original research and/or experimentation in order to disseminate it for scholarly use.

Examples of scholarly journals would include:

Journal of Nursing Scholarship
Journal of Advanced Nursing
Western Journal of Nursing Research
Journal of Holistic Nursing
Journal of Gerontological Nursing

- **General Interest and News Publications:** These publications provide information to a broader spectrum of concerned citizens and contain the following characteristics:
 - Attractive in appearance
 - Newspaper or magazine format
 - Articles may be written by editorial staff, scholars, or freelance writers.
 - Language use is geared toward the general public
 - Published by commercial entities, individuals, and/or professional organizations.

Examples of general interest and news publications would include:

Time
Newsweek
New York Times
U.S. News and World Report
Washington Post
Wall Street Journal
National Geographic

- **Popular Journals:** Geared toward the mass market, these publications usually exhibit the following traits:
 - Visually appealing.
 - Contain numerous photographs and drawings.
 - Rarely cite sources.
 - Information contained usually second or third hand.
 - Articles are general in nature, and with very little depth.
 - Geared toward entertaining reader, selling products, or promoting a particular viewpoint.

Some examples of popular journals would include:

People Weekly
Southern Living
Ladies' Home Journal
Gentlemen's Quarterly
Essence
In Touch

- **Tabloid Publications:** Usually found in the supermarket checkout aisles containing the following attributes:
 - Contains elementary language which is often sensational.
 - Arouses readers' curiosity with colorful visuals and flashy headlines, often bordering on outlandish.
 - Can be highly entertaining.

Examples of tabloid publications would include:

National Enquirer
Globe
Weekly World News
Star

7. *Evaluating Web Resources*

The Internet is a vast conglomeration of networks which collectively contains an almost infinite amount of information. However, keep in mind that since the Internet is uncensored, not all of the resources available on the Internet are reliable and/or factual. It is the user's responsibility to differentiate between the reliable resources on the Internet and the unreliable ones; and to pinpoint the Internet sites which have information relevant or pertinent to your topic. Use the following guide to help you determine which sites most likely will contain reliable and useful information:

- **Types of Internet Sites Providing Reliable Data**
 - Educational sites - **.edu**
 - Government sites - **.gov**
 - Professional organization sites - **.org**
- **Other Points to Consider**
 - **Scope:** Is the coverage of the topic **complete**? How detailed is the information given?

- **Content:** Is the information given **accurate** and/or **factual**? Does it reflect opinion of the writer? Are his/her sources cited for **verification** purposes? Is the site **biased**? Does the site clearly identify person(s) and/or organizations **responsible** for the content? How **qualified** is the author? Are dates provided as to when the site was **created** and/or last **revised** and **updated**? Are links **provided** to related resources, and if so, are they current and up-to-date? Is text **well-written** and **easy to understand**?
- **Graphics and Multimedia Design:** Is the site **visually appealing**?
- **Navigation:** Is the site **easy** to use? Can the information you need be obtained within **three** clicks of a mouse? Is the resource you need accessible via standard computer equipment and software?