

VI. Evaluate Research Materials

* Criteria to Evaluate Research Materials in Music

After you have located various materials on your topic, you should evaluate them to determine their usefulness, quality and authority. Keep in mind that evaluating information is an essential component of the library/research process. In all areas of study, including music, the following criteria should be considered:

1. Author's qualifications or credentials

Is the author practicing in the field? Is (s)he an authority in the field? How many articles or books has (s)he written on the topic?

2. Timeliness of publication

Is the information timely or out-of-date for your topic? Refer to and verify publication dates, as well as the frequency of the source. Some information sources are updated daily, some weekly and monthly.

Is the information still valid for your topic? If you need the most current information, then timeliness is important. However, if you are looking for historical perspectives on your topic, then the date of the information can vary.

3. Accurate/Factual Information Supported by Evidence

Does the information located and retrieved come from authoritative sources? If it is from a database, is it from a magazine or a scholarly journal? Most scholarly journals or publications contain information that is reviewed by several experts in the field before it is approved for publication. These sources are called refereed or peer-reviewed publications. If possible, also locate reviews of books and other items to determine quality before using as resources.

How thoroughly is the information edited and presented by the author(s)? If you obtained the information from a web site, how stable or permanent is the information? Some types and sources of information will remain accessible and more valid over time than other items.

Is the coverage of your topic adequate for the level of research? The item's table of contents, index, abstract or summary, and its notes/works cited/bibliography are other indicators of the quality and accuracy of the information.

4. Primary vs. Secondary Sources

In general, information comes from two types of sources:

Primary Sources: These are the first-hand or eye-witness accounts of an event. They include, personal interviews, news articles, reviews of performances, recordings, government documents, letters, and autobiographies.

For example, the liner notes (written information included with a recording) for the classic Miles Davis jazz album “Kind of Blue”, written by the pianist Bill Evans, one of the performers on the recording; and Sideman, an autobiography written by musician and TSU professor William Oscar Smith.

Secondary Sources: These are the sources that analyze, relate, evaluate or criticize based on information gathered from primary sources. For example, Jazz, the documentary series by Ken Burns, which aired on the Public Broadcasting System, and is now available in book, videocassette, and compact disc formats.

5. Reputation of the Publisher

The publisher of the source is another indicator as to the quality of the information. For example, a university press generally publishes scholarly material, while a vanity publisher will produce based on an author’s ability to pay publication costs. Many of the largest book publishers are owned by corporations which may have interests in areas unrelated to books, media, and other forms of information and communication.

Some reputable publishers include Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, Columbia University Press, Macmillan, Random House, and McGraw-Hill. Leading music publishers include Da Capo Press, G. Schirmer, Kjos, Hal Leonard Corporation, and others.

6. Type of Publication

Sources can be scholarly, popular, trade, or government publications, to name a few examples. The distinction must be made for research purposes, as these types of resources reflect different levels of complexity in presenting ideas and information.

Scholarly Journals

Webster's Third International Dictionary definition of a scholarly journal is a publication that is concerned with academic study, especially research; exhibits methods, attitudes and the manners of scholarship. Articles and documents may also contain various graphs, charts, and statistical information in addition to written text. Other research is always cited through footnotes, endnotes, and/or bibliographies. The authors of articles are scholars, experts, and/or researchers in in the subject area. The language used is discipline- related, which affects the tone and writing style.

Scholarly journals report on original and modified research, its application, and disseminate it to add to the knowledge base in the subject area, stimulating additional research by other scholars.

Examples of scholarly journals in music include Journal of the American Musicological Society, Journal of Music Therapy, and Journal of Research in Music Education.

General Interest and News Publications

These publications appear in journal or newspaper formats. The articles contained in these sources may be written by editorial staff, scholars, or free-lance writers. The language style is suitable for the general public. Publishers of these sources include commercial entities, individuals, and/or professional organizations.

The aim of these sources is to attract the attention of and provide information to a broad audience, and are supported by commercial advertisements and sales to individuals and institutions such as libraries.

General interest publications in music include Billboard, Clavier, Down Beat, Instrumentalist, Musician, and Opera News.

Popular Journals

These sources are also general interest publications, but they may also be targeted to specific groups of readers. Visual information (photography and/or illustrations, on the covers and throughout issues) highlights personalities and subjects along with the text/articles. Information may be from primary (interviews) or secondary sources.

The purpose and intent is to entertain readers, sell products, and/or promote celebrities, lifestyles, and viewpoints.

Some examples of popular journals with a music focus include Entertainment, Gospel Today, People Weekly, Rolling Stone, and Vibe.

Tabloid Publications

These sources use sensational headlines and bizarre photography to attract attention and arouse curiosity. Most, if not all of the information included is questionable and unreliable, and should not be considered in legitimate research. Some examples in this category include National Inquirer, Globe, and Star.

* Criteria to Evaluate Web Resources

As in the examples given above, not all Internet resources are equally valuable or even reliable. The researcher must sift through the vast amount of information and pinpoint those sources that are relevant for the area of study. As a rule, web pages in some designated domains present factual information. For example, the web pages with URL addresses that end with .edu or .gov provide reliable information since they are sponsored by educational institutions or government agencies. Pages with .org, .net, and .com domains include both reputable and questionable organizations and companies; even in the case of .edu, it is wise to determine if the educational institution is well-established and accredited.

You may consider the following points in evaluating web sources:

1. Scope

How complete is the information presented? Is the information general and broad in scope, or comprehensive/more specific?

2. Content

Is the information accurate/factual, with documentation from other sources, or does it only reflect the personal opinion of the author? Does the author list his/her sources for verification? Is the information biased? Does the information provide the name(s) of person(s) or organization(s) responsible for the content of the information? Is the author qualified to provide the information? How current is the information? Are dates of publication given, and as well as any indicators of revision or updating of older data? Are there links to other related resources? If so, are these items up-to-date? Is the text well written and communicated clearly?

3. Graphics/Multimedia Design

Is the page creative in design and use of other technology applicat?

4. Navigation

Is the web resource easy to use (user-friendly)? Can you access the resource via standard computer equipment and software, or is other specialized hardware/software needed?