



HOW TO IDENTIFY CREDIBLE SOURCES

For many consumers, it's hard to determine whether an online source is credible or not. Since information on the internet can be created—or in some cases fabricated—by any user, it's easy to present false information as fact. Credible sources are ones the reader can trust. When reporting on a topic, writers should always use a credible source. Citing non-credible sources can damage a writer's reputation by unknowingly broadcasting false information to his or her audience. So, how can we find credible sources, especially when it pertains to the food we eat?



Check that the source is up-to-date.

Materials published within the last ten years are typically considered up-to-date. If your paper is on a scientific topic, you would want even more recent information.



Examine the source's and author's credentials and affiliations.

Always research the background of any source you are considering using for your paper. Often, companies fund research with the hope of a desired outcome. This can still result in good research, but must be watched with a careful eye. Consider the author's credentials and affiliations.



Evaluate what sources are cited by the author.

Peer-reviewed sources set the highest standard for credible information—the review process subjects an author's scholarly work, research, or ideas to the scrutiny of others who are experts in the same field. Be skeptical if the author doesn't list sources. Always review the sources listed and make sure they stand up to scrutiny.



Determine if the publisher of the source is reputable.

Well-known publishers thoroughly check the facts of the information they are distributing. Usually, if the publisher is a large, widely-known magazine or journal, then it is a credible publisher.



Identify the web domain.

The last few letters of a website address reveal information about the credibility of a source.

- **Government or military websites (.gov or .mil)** are generally reliable sources. However, be skeptical of political sites intended to shape public opinion.
- **University websites (.edu)** typically present factual information. Still use caution, checking for credibility and authority.
- **Company websites (.com)** are often biased, but can still provide useful information about a particular company or industry.
- **Special interest websites (.org)** are sponsored by a professional organization. Not all organizations are reliable, and should be examined with some scrutiny.

AGRICULTURE INDUSTRY BOARDS

Many of the foods we eat are represented by agriculture industry boards, charged with the responsibility of educating consumers and driving demand for their product. Industry boards can provide a wealth of information—they present first hand knowledge about the agricultural product they produce. The Beef Checkoff Program is a producer-funded beef promotion and research program created through an Act of Congress—the Beef Promotion and Research Act of 1985. As such, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has been given authority by Congress to oversee the Beef Checkoff Program. As part of its oversight responsibilities, USDA reviews and approves Beef Checkoff plans, projects, and budgets, and keeps a watchful eye over how the Beef Checkoff communicates with consumers. Even still, no website should be trusted one hundred percent without reviewing the sources listed and making sure they stand up to scrutiny.

WHY IT MATTERS

With internet research, we have nearly unlimited access to a wide range of topics. Today, responsibly consuming information comes with additional homework—carefully considering the validity and objectivity of the information at hand. Identifying credible sources is not easy, but it is an important life skill that will serve you well through your educational and professional careers. When you arm yourself with the tools to find credible and reliable information online, you are becoming a better-informed digital citizen. There is an old saying: "A lie makes it all the way around the world while the truth is still putting its shoes on." Being deliberate and careful is sometimes counter-cultural but will prove to be beneficial to you individually and to our greater society.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- 1 Why is it important for writers to use credible sources?
- 2 In what ways is it harder to find trustworthy sources of information?
- 3 Would you consider being able to identify credible sources as a life skill? Why or why not?