How do I identify credible sources?

When collecting evidence for a research project, information report, argument paper, or similar task, it is important to use factual information. For an argument paper, it is true you want to sway your reader and will have a clear position and perspective. However, basing your evidence on facts will be more convincing to your readers. For a research project or report, you will want to include accurate and reliable facts and information. Consider the following when you collect evidence so you can use credible sources.

Does the writing seem too good to be true?

Sometimes content seems so amazing that it makes a reader wonder if it's true or not. Beware of this as it can indicate unreliability and inaccuracy. Ask these questions to help you determine if the writing might be largely untrue: *Does this information seem unbelievable? Does it make sense to you or others? Does what you read conflict with something you already know to be true? Does the writing seem like hyperbole where something is grossly exaggerated? Is there a way to check this information out so you know whether it is true or not?*

Who wrote this information?

Identifying the author can help you determine the credibility and truthfulness of your source. Consider these questions: *What is the author's education, training, or experience as it relates to this content? Does he or she have a professional title or is he or she recognized as an authority? Is the author connected with an organization? If so, can you determine if it is a respected organization? Can you contact the author or the company? If the author is unnamed, can you take extra steps to find information about this author?*

When was the article written?

For certain topics, how old the information is can impact the reliability and accuracy. *Does the author include a date for the information written? Is it important that the information be current or are you researching a topic from long ago? Do the links on the site work, or are they outdated?*

Can the information be verified?

To check the accuracies of information, we might consider these questions: *What sources does the author of this information use? Are these sources listed in the article? Does the author include a works cited or other links to provide additional resources or original source information? Are there identified sources for any data or statistics in the content? Can you find other sources that share the same information, or is this the only source?*

How might the tone or style of the writing reflect its credibility?

The actual design of the website will not necessarily mean it is unreliable. What is most important is the actual writing. The way in which an article is written can reveal clues about its credibility. Consider the following: *Does the article have several grammar, spelling, punctuation, or capitalization errors? Is the writing emotional and include language that has a bitter, critical, or demanding tone? Is the writing so informal that it seems hard to trust? Does it seem unfair or extremely slanted to a point of view and biased? If it is biased, are there facts to back it up or other sites to verify what it states? Does it seem like it would anger or manipulate people?*

Why does the author write this information?

Sometimes people write articles for reasons that contribute to unreliability, bias, and untruths. This doesn't mean that a company writing an article about something it is passionate about will be unreliable. Or that a person who writes a persuasive piece is completely biased. Argument papers are by nature meant to persuade a reader, so take this into account while reading. As you read sources, use your judgment and the clues about credibility to make sure you access the information you need to satisfy your task.