Evaluating Information

Why do you need to evaluate information?

We have entered the Information Age and are inundated daily with data from many sources in a variety of forms. Each year the number of books and journals published increases. A daily edition of The New York Times includes more information than the average person in the 18th century would come across in a lifetime. People can watch television 24 hours a day on more than a thousand stations. Thousands of radio stations broadcast nonstop worldwide and modern communication technology allows immediate news everywhere. Electronic publishing assaults computer users with a never ending array of information.

In this data-rich environment, information consumers must learn to cope with information anxiety and to sift through the information for sensible decision making. The following checklist of questions can be used as a guide to evaluate information in print, audiovisual or electronic formats.

Identifying Your Information Needs

- What information do you need?
- What do you already know about the subject?
- Do you have any preconceived ideas or biases on the topic?
- Do you want general or specialized information?
- What is the central focus of your information need?
- How much information do you want to gather?
- What types of information do you want?

Evaluating the Source of the Information

- How did you find the source of information?
  - Did you use an index?
  - A review of references from other works?
- What type of source is it?
  - Is it scholarly?
  - Popular?
  - Governmental?
  - Private?
- What are the author's or producer's qualifications for this topic?
  - Education?
  - Experience?
  - Occupation?
  - Position?
  - Affiliation?
  - Publications?
• When was the information published?
  o Is it a first edition?
  o A revision?
  o A reprint or a rerun?
• In which country was it published or produced?
• What is the reputation of the publisher, producer or distributor?
  o Is it a university?
  o An alternative press?
  o A private / political organization?
• Was the material reviewed or edited for publication?
• Does the source show political or cultural biases?
• Is a bibliography or other form of documentation included?
• What is the best format for accessing the information, considering cost, time, ease of use?
• Is it organized so you can easily access the information you require?

Determining if the Information is Suitable for Your Needs

• What is the scope and purpose of the work?
• For what audiences is it intended?
  o General public
  o Students
  o Professionals
• Is the information in the most appropriate format for your topic?
  o Print
  o Slide
  o Film
  o Audio
  o Electronic
• Can the data be transferred or manipulated electronically?
• Is it presented clearly and objectively?
• Is it suitable for your level of understanding of the subject, or is it too simple or too difficult?
• Are you able to retrieve the information needed through tables of contents, indexes or other locators?
• Does it have the feature you need?
  o Graphs
  o Charts
  o Tables
  o Glossaries
  o Maps
  o Illustrations?
• Does it contain the information you need?
• Is the information current enough for your topic or do you need historical information?
• What is the geographic coverage or orientation?

Evaluating the Information Content

• What is the author’s thesis or purpose?
• What are the main points or concepts?
• What facts and opinions are presented?
• Are various points of view represented?
• Is this a report of primary research?
  o Surveys
  o Experiments
  o Observations
• Is it a compilation of information gathered from other sources?
• Is the source organized in a logical manner for the subject?
• What are the major findings?
• Are the conclusions justified by the information presented?
• Is there adequate documentation
  o Bibliography
  o Footnotes
  o Credits
  o Quotations
• Does this work update, substantiate or add to the knowledge on the subject?
• Is this information verified in other sources in the discipline?
• Do experts in the field agree on the findings?
• Do the findings support or refute your original ideas on the topic?