Evaluating References Using the C.R.A.A.P. Test

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There comes a time in every author’s life when he must decide whether a source is worthy enough to be included in his masterpiece of an essay. Luckily for us, the students at California’s Chico University took a break from partying and developed an effective way to evaluate a source’s credibility. Appropriately acronymed C.R.A.A.P., this five-step test assesses the reliability of potential sources, and makes it easy to decide whether or not to include a source.

⚠️ Currency

- If the source is a written text, when was it published? If it is an online resource, when was it originally posted online?
- Could current events during the time of publishing/posting affect the legitimacy of the source?
  - For example, an article written in 1941 could very well include nationalist bias intended to spur readers into supporting the United States’ WWII effort.
- Was this information published recently? If not, you must consider whether it is necessary for you to strictly utilize recent sources or if older sources will work.
  - For example, a scientific essay on a new cancer treatment would exclusively utilize recent information, while an essay on the impact of the Gettysburg Address would allow for a more lax application of sources.
- Has any of the information in the source been refuted or proved wrong by modern science?

⚠️ Relevance

- Will this source be used as an argument or counter-argument? If it is used as an argument, how strong is the link to your thesis? If it is a counter-argument, can you effectively counter it to make it work in favor of your thesis?
- Have you ensured that this source is the most appropriate vessel to carry this information?
  - For example, if the information is available both on Wikipedia and in a scholarly article, make sure that the appropriate source is cited as the owner of the content.
- If writing a research paper, are all of your sources scholarly? If not, it would be in your best interest to find a scholarly source for all of your provided information.

⚠️ Authority

- Who is the author of the source? If unavailable, who is the publisher? Be wary of sources with no author.
What research has the author conducted to make him an appropriate source of information?

If it is an online source, what is the suffix for the site?
- .com = website has commercial intent
- .edu = website was written by someone affiliated with a college or university
- .org = website is run by a non-profit organization
- .gov = website is written and run by government personnel
  - Understanding these acronyms can help you better understand the motive for writing the paper. For example, taking information regarding a shady U.S. policy from a .gov site may not be a wise idea, as the information may be biased to favor the writer (in this case, the U.S. government). This information would be better represented by an .edu site.

Accuracy

What kind of source is this?
- An experiment? A study? A primary source? A separate source?

Have the findings been peer-reviewed?
- Be careful using sources that are not primary or peer reviewed, as they could easily contain bias or incorrect information that can drastically affect the credibility of your paper.

Is there an alternate source that agrees with the information provided in this source?
- A "no" for this question does not necessarily disqualify the source from use, as information could be brand new and not yet verified. However, tread with caution regardless.

Is there any reason to believe that the paper contains elements of bias?

Purpose

Why was the paper written?
- Was it to inform and teach? Or was it made for the much more treacherous purpose of persuasion?

Does the paper appear to include any ulterior motives?
- For example, does the source appear to try and sway the reader into a particular way of thinking?

With this test in your arsenal, your paper will be free of the unreliable sources that commonly bog down student's papers. Ditch the crap, and go with the CRAAP.

Works Cited