

Transcript: How to evaluate your sources?

How do you know whether your research has turned up sources that are “authoritative”? That is to say: credible, objective, and trustworthy. In this academic sense of the word, what makes a given publication “authoritative”?

In the following screencast we will cover:

1. Elements that signal academic authority in a publication.
2. How to evaluate whether a book is academically reliable?
3. How to evaluate whether a journal and its articles are academically reliable?
4. What are trade publications?
5. How to evaluate whether a website is academically reliable?

You can glean immediate clues about whether a source is academically reliable by investigating the following features that signal academic authority in a source:

❖ **Author’s qualifications**

Is s/he affiliated with a university or research institution? Does s/he hold a PhD in a relevant discipline? Does s/he have other relevant publications? Is his or her work cited by other scholars?

❖ **Publisher**

Is the publisher a university press or a research institution? Is it a professional association or a government organization? University presses and research institutions adhere to higher peer review standards than other publishers. We will talk about the implications of this when we get to the **peer review** section.

❖ **References**

Are there any? Credible research publications list their sources. By building upon other scholars’ ideas and by making this process explicit through a trail of citations, academics establish credibility and authority. What do the references tell you about the breadth and currency of topic coverage by the author? Do they reveal his/her biases?

❖ **Peer Review**

Unlike magazines, scholarly publications undergo a rigorous peer-review process. Peer-review is a process of pre-approval or review of one’s work by professional peers intended to uphold academic standards within a given discipline. Essential to the *peer review* process are referees. These are existing experts in a given field called upon to evaluate potential publications or conference proposals. Referees assess the quality of the writing and research and may suggest changes to the original work before it is deemed fit for publication or presentation. Hence, *peer review* is an essential part of assessing whether one’s sources of information are authoritative, that is, credible, objective, and trustworthy.

❖ **Date of Publication**

Do you require the latest information, or a classic or standard text? If your topic requires an overview or historiography of the discipline you may need older as well as recent materials. Recognize the time needs of your topic and seek sources that reflect these needs.

We can summarize the general differences between scholarly and popular sources based on several criteria:

Criteria	Scholarly publications: Journals, Books, Conference Proceedings	Non-scholarly publications: Magazines, Newspapers, and Websites
Purpose:	report independent research findings	provide information at a profit; sell ads
Audience :	scholars, researchers, professionals	general public
Author:	from research organization (often holds PhD)	often no credentials necessary
Tone:	formal, scientific, technical	informal
Validation:	references and/or citations	often no references provided
Layout:	often mostly text, lengthy	shorter, many illustrations
Availability:	academic libraries, and the web (often at a cost)	bookstores, newsstands, and the web
Examples:	<i>Canadian Journal of Experimental Psychology</i>	<i>Psychology Today, Maclean's, Wikipedia</i>

Let's go over a few publication examples and assess what makes them academically reliable using the above criteria.

How can you evaluate whether **a book** is academically reliable?

We can compare two examples:

Smolak, L., & Thompson, J. K. (2009). *Body image, eating disorders, and obesity in youth: Assessment, prevention, and treatment*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
and a popular book

McGraw, P. C. (2003). *The ultimate weight solution: The 7 keys to weight loss freedom*. New York: Free Press.

- Author's Qualifications
- Publisher
- References
- Date of Publication
- Organization and content
- Audience and tone

I came across the book *Body image, eating disorders, and obesity in youth: Assessment, prevention, and treatment* while searching in the UNB Libraries' WorldCat catalogue.

Let's inspect its table of content. In the "Contributors" section of the table of content, I can verify the credentials of the contributors to this book, but if I want further information, such as a list of their publications, I can enter the authors' names into a search engine, such as Google.

In the "About the Editors" section of the table of content I see that the editors and contributors, Linda Smolak and J. Kevin Thompson, both hold PhDs and are faculty members at American

universities. I can also see that they both have previously published in this area of research, which is body image and eating disorders.

The publisher is the American Psychological Association. In the field of psychology, they are the largest American professional organization representing researchers, educators, and professionals. By visiting their website, you will find that they have a host of important publications, databases, and other resources for psychology researchers.

Each chapter has an extensive reference list, full of references to peer-reviewed journals and other scholarly sources, which is a marker of a good academic source. The date of publication is 2009, which is relatively recent in the field of psychology. The general topic of body image and eating disorders it is not a time-sensitive topic unlike, for instance, pharmacological treatments of eating disorders, which would require the most recent information on latest treatments.

Let's look at the organization and content. The table of content allows us to glean all of the individual chapters. It has an author index, a subject index, and notes about the editors. The formal and scientific tone of writing indicates that the intended audience is professionals and academics. Overall, the book *Body image, eating disorders, and obesity in youth: Assessment, prevention, and treatment* has all of the markers of an authoritative scholarly source.

Now, we can take look at our comparison book, which I found at a garage sale, called *The ultimate weight solution: The 7 keys to weight loss freedom* whose author is Phil McGraw.

I had to search for Dr. Phil's credentials on the web, since they are not made explicit in the book. I learned that he does have a PhD in clinical psychology. He is a talk-show host and a self-help author of bestsellers. Although he is a successful entertainer, he is not an academic author, meaning, he does not have a track record of academic (peer-reviewed) publications nor is he affiliated with an academic or research institution.

His book was published by Free Press which, as I investigated on the web, was a commercial publisher subsumed by Simon & Schuster, another commercial publisher, not an academic press.

There are no citations within the body of the text and the list of references at the end of the book is less than 5 pages long. Among those references, a number of them refer to popular rather than academic sources.

The organization and content of the book are that of a self-help book, organized around directives and personal advice. The tone of the book is unsurprisingly very casual, intended for a general audience. Overall, *The ultimate weight solution* has none of the markers of an authoritative scholarly source.

How to evaluate whether **a journal article** is academically reliable?

Compare

Glaus, J., Vandeleur, C. L., von Känel, R., Lasserre, A. M., Strippoli, M. F., Gholam-Rezaee, M., Preisig, M. (2014). Associations between mood, anxiety or substance use disorders and inflammatory

markers after adjustment for multiple covariates in a population-based study. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 5836-45. Doi:10.1016/j.jpsychires.2014.07.012

with

Sherman, Carl. (2015). DEPRESSION, DISSECTED. *Psychology Today*, 48(4), 33-35.

Just as we did with the two books, we will look at several criteria when evaluating the articles.

- Author's Qualifications
- Publisher
- References
- Date of Publication
- Organization and content
- Audience and tone

Keep in mind that even though both of the articles are sourced from the UNB Libraries' electronic journals collections, they diverge significantly in their academic relevance.

Let's take a look at the article from the *Journal of Psychiatric Research*. If we click on the plus sign "Show More" link, we can see the authors' academic affiliations displayed under the title and if we click on their hyperlinked names we can see that they have other relevant publications.

Let's take a look at the quality of this journal by going to its home webpage. The journal is published by Elsevier that is a well-known academic publisher in the field of science and technology. To the left, we can see the journal's metrics. (In the academic world, these measures determine a publication's scholarly ranking, which you don't need to worry about at this stage). More importantly, we can see an editorial policy albeit a short one. We can also inspect the academic and research affiliations of the editors-in-chief and assistant editors.

The article itself has plenty of academic references. The date of publication is very recent. The table of content shows a meticulous organization of the content that includes data. The tone of the article is formal and uses technical language. Overall, this article has all of the markers of an authoritative scholarly source.

Our second article is called "Depression, dissected" and it is from *Psychology Today*. When we do a web search to find out more about Carl Sherman, the author of this piece, the search reveals that he is a popular science writer not an academic. When we check out *Psychology Today* on the web we learn that it is a popular, for-profit publication not an academic journal.

Nowhere on its home page does it say that it is affiliated with an academic or research institution, nor does it say anything about its editorial policy or peer-review. *Psychology Today* may solicit experts to contribute its content—it tells you as much in the "Experts" tab of its homepage—but this content is not peer-reviewed in the manner that you should expect from a scholarly publication.

The article is relatively short with an attractive picture on the front page, no formal references are provided, and the tone of the writing is very informal, which is apparent from the article’s opening line: “Depression research has become something of a downer.” Overall, this article, even if it is a good read, has none of the markers of an authoritative scholarly source.

Trade publications fall somewhere between popular magazines and scholarly publications on the spectrum of academic reliability. They are intended for working professionals or managers in a particular field. Articles from trade journals tend to be easy to read, and they often point to specific research findings, but they may not be as reliable as scholarly journal articles. Examples of trade publications include:

- Monitor on Psychology* <http://www.apa.org/monitor/index.aspx>
- Accounting Today* <http://www.accountingtoday.com/>
- Energy Manager* <http://www.energy-manager.ca/>
- Advertising Age* <http://adage.com/>

How to evaluate whether **a website** is academically reliable?

It is easier to determine whether a book or a journal publisher is reputable than it is to evaluate a website. Generally, unless they are authored by recognized and well-known publishers, websites are much less authoritative sources of academic information. We will look at several criteria when evaluating a website

Organizations sponsoring or affiliated with the website	What is the provenance of the website? Is the provider of the website an educational institution (.edu), a not-for-profit organization (.org), a government agency (.gov or .gc), a commercial enterprise (.com or .ca)?
Editors/authors and their credentials	Are the editors/authors and their credentials clearly identified? Are the authors/editors affiliated with a university or research institution? Do they hold PhDs in the relevant discipline? Do they have other relevant publications? Is their work cited by other scholars?
An advisory board	Does the website have an advisory board that consults with the website’s editors? What are the credentials of these advisers?
An editorial policy	Is there an explanation of how material published on the website is evaluated and shaped before being published? Remember the importance of peer review .
Contributors and their credentials	Are the contributors and their credentials clearly identified? Are the contributors affiliated with a university or research institution? Do they hold PhDs in the relevant discipline? Do they have other relevant publications? Is their work cited by other scholars?
Date of Publication/Revision	How current is the information on the website? When was the last time the material was revised or updated?

Keeping these variables in mind, we will compare the Canadian Cancer Society’s website <http://www.cancer.ca> to Dr. Axe’s website <http://draxe.com/>.

When you visit the website of The Canadian Cancer Society, and inspect the links provided at the bottom of their webpage, you can read about this organization's mission statement, history, and verify that they are transparent about the identities of their staff and board members, and about their corporate sponsors.

Very importantly, you can inspect their editorial policy. In their editorial policy, we find several important statements. The CCS maintains editorial independence from their corporate sponsors, which means that the information the CCS provides is not altered or edited by their sponsors. The CCS crafts their policies and health messages based on scientific research. Here, they list a few of the organizations they partner with and the Society's standards for evaluating evidence. The CCS also emphasizes the importance of their external experts (health care professionals, scientists and researchers) in providing reliable information. Finally, in the "Our Editorial Process" section, the CCS describes how their content is developed, updated, and improved.

If you go back to the links provided at the bottom of the page, you can go into "Our Research" link to find out general descriptions of the types of research they are involved in and, under "Our researchers," you can learn the identities and profiles of doctors and academics who partner with The Canadian Cancer Society.

The links they provide allow you to learn more about their research initiatives, their publications, and their ethical fundraising.

At the very bottom of the page, to the left, you can see the date of the last update to the website and a seal of approval from the Health on the Net Foundation.

The level and detail of disclosure on this website should give you a sense of transparency and professionalism that inspire confidence in the information.

That being said, the information on this website is aimed at patients and health professionals. Depending on the topic requirements of paper, you may have to seek out the published scientific literature generated by the researchers who partner with The Canadian Cancer Society, rather than the website. Use the website as a stepping stone to find out more about cutting edge cancer research projects and the identities of researchers involved in different areas of cancer research. Follow up the researchers' names and their projects within discipline-specific article databases, books, and encyclopedias.

On Dr. Axe's website, we can see right away the high volume of ads encouraging us to buy health products. At the bottom of the page, the "Affiliate Disclosure" link confirms for us that Dr. Axe receives commission from the products he promotes.

In the "Start Here" link, we find that Dr. Axe is a naturopath, chiropractor, and nutritionist, but, when you search his name in the UNB Library's article databases, he has not published in any academic, peer-reviewed publications, nor is he affiliated with any credible research institution. The quality of the information he provides is further undermined by the following disclaimer at the bottom of his website:

“These statements have not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent any disease. If you are pregnant, nursing, taking medication, or have a medical condition, consult your physician before using this product.”

You may find content here that inspires you to pursue nutritional research into dietary supplements, but you will need access to the library’s academic journals and other resources, such as books, conference proceedings, and encyclopedias, to seriously engage with your topic.

A website can serve as a useful starting point for your research, and can potentially lead you to authoritative information, but don’t expect to use websites as standalone sources, unless their content is explicitly produced by verified researchers affiliated with academic and/or research institutions.

In summary, this screencast has shown you:

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For more information about how to evaluate your sources, visit a Research Help Desk at any UNB library, go to www.lib.unb.ca/research, or talk to your subject librarian whose name and contact information is available in every subject guide.