Interpreting Sources

There is a wealth of information to be found when you are researching for a paper. However, it is hard to know which information is valid and which information is biased or even completely untrue. To support your paper properly, you want to include only the most accurate and relevant information, but how do you find it? It is important to learn how to interpret your sources properly.

How do outside sources benefit your research?

- You can learn new background information about your topic.
- You can provide evidence for and lend authority to your paper.
- You can provide and refute alternative points of view on your topic to lend credence to your position on the argument.

Once your sources are gathered, you need to practice active and critical reading skills to pick up important information and determine whether or not it will be useful to you.

- First, do not immediately accept or disregard a source just because it does or does not support your thesis.
- Be open to the author’s opinion, but try to determine if it is fact, opinion, or propaganda.
- Is the author credible?
- Does the author use both primary and secondary sources?
- Are the author’s conclusions well supported with accurate and convincing evidence?
- What audience is the author addressing?
- At the end of your reading, check the works cited and/or bibliography for other sources that you may want to consider looking at.

Often, students turn to the Internet for their sources, but a word of caution is needed here. It is usually difficult to determine the audience, intent, and authorship of a website. Also, anyone can put anything he or she wants onto the Internet with little to no screening for accuracy or validity of the content.

Notable exceptions to this rule include online databases accessed through University library websites. These databases include a combination of peer-reviewed articles and online versions of reputable print sources.
Print sources are susceptible to some of the same problems, but publishing in print is generally a competitive and expensive process with a lot of screening for content. Bottom line: Be extra wary of Internet sources, and don’t be afraid to hit the stacks!