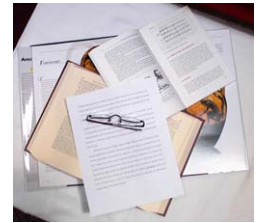


Evaluating Books & Other Lengthy Sources

Books are integral parts of the research project as are other longer works such as government documents. In one place, a researcher can find a variety of topics related to a broader subject, identify other sources of information on the topic, and discover important vocabulary that will help in locating additional information on a topic. While the mere fact of publication might imply that the source is valuable, not all published sources will be appropriate for academic research. Following are characteristics/qualities to examine when evaluating books and longer sources for inclusion in an academic paper.



Authorship

It is of paramount importance to identify additional information about the author. Who is the author and what qualifies him/her to be writing a book on the chosen subject? Is the author affiliated with a university or other research organization? Has the author written other articles or books on the same or similar subjects? What kind of critical reception has been accorded the author by other researchers and by book reviewers?

Where to Look:

Book title page, introductory pages, book jacket. Many books will include author qualifications on the title page. For example, an author might have a Ph.D. in English or might be affiliated with a specific university as a faculty member. This information could be included on the book title page. If there are no qualifications listed on the title page, some books will have a brief author background page somewhere in the front material of the book. This could be a section entitled "About the Author." If there is no background printed directly in the book, in many cases the book jacket that encases the book might have an author blurb on the inside or back cover, sometimes with a picture of the author.

Biographical Sources (print and electronic). If the author is fairly well known professionally, further information might be available from any number of print or electronic biographical sources. Print sources could include *Current Biography*, one of the *Who's Who* publications, or a biographical dictionary for a specific discipline, like the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*. Biographical data coming from print sources can be fairly extensive or might be very abbreviated and sketchy. While more information might be preferable, being able to at least find an author's educational background can be a useful way of gauging how qualified he/she might be. Electronic resources common to many libraries include databases such as *Biography in Context* and the *Biography Reference Bank*, which make quick work of locating information on authors in a variety of disciplines. These two sources are full text, so the biographical information is immediately available to the researcher. A couple of other sources that can be helpful in directing a researcher toward sources for biographical information include the *Biography and Genealogy Master Index* and the *Biography Index*. These sources will not provide full biographical sketches but they will provide information on what sources provide biographies.

Internet. Many times author background can be located just doing a Google search. The usual warning applies to information located on the Internet: *caveat emptor* (let the buyer beware). Of course in this case, the warning is not to a buyer but to anyone searching for free information on the Internet. Be sure to carefully evaluate who is responsible for the information that you locate searching the Internet. An avid reader's vanity page for Stephen King, for example, might be rife with mistakes and errors, where we would hope to find accurate information from an "official" website for King. The Internet can also be useful in identifying author affiliations. Many times a researcher might be able to determine that an author of interest is affiliated with a particular university or with a certain research group or with a company. This can be helpful in further assessing the author's qualifications for writing about a particular topic.

Library catalogs and article databases. An additional way to learn more about an author is to search library catalogs and databases to see what other materials the author has had published. Does a search of the UNF library's catalog, for example, identify any other publications by the same author? Are these on the same or similar subjects and do they appear to be written at a level acceptable for the research project at hand? If a search of library catalogs does not turn up additional publications, it might be useful to look for articles that the author might have had published in magazines, newspapers, or journals as a means of determining his/her background and experience. Large database systems such as *ProQuest Central* will search literally millions of articles making it fairly simple to determine how widely published an author might be. Citation indexes can also be very useful sources to consult. The most widely known system for tracking book and article citations is known as the *Web of Knowledge*. This database enables a searcher to look for a particular work by a specific author and see how many other researchers have referenced this particular work in their own research. A work that has numerous references will likely indicate that the author is fairly well respected by other researchers in the field.

Documentation

Unless it is a novel, an extended essay, an autobiography, a collection of essays or other primary materials, or some other type of publication that doesn't require references, a book will cite references to other sources of information. Academic research routinely involves surveying what has already been written on a topic as a means for launching into further discovery. Cited references might also include suggestions for further reading by other experts in a field.

What to Look For:

Footnotes, Endnotes, & Parenthetical References. Documentation could be handled in a number of ways depending on the specific writing style being used in the production of the book. Some styles prefer documentation of sources in the form of footnotes, or references included at the bottom of the page and keyed by number to information within the text on the page. A footnote will document where the cited information comes from, including who originated the material and date and page information necessary to finding the source. In some cases, instead of providing documentation at the bottom of each page, a style might call for documenting sources at the end of a chapter or even at the end of the entire book. These so-called endnotes will provide the same type of information given by footnotes. Many styles now make use of so-called parenthetical references. In these styles, an abbreviated citation is provided immediately following information that comes from elsewhere. Citation information will be enclosed in parentheses and typically includes author's name(s) and either date or page, depending on the requirements for the style.

Bibliography or Reference List. Even if a source uses footnotes or endnotes, it will likely include a separate bibliography of sources or a reference list. A bibliography might follow an individual chapter or might be provided at the end of the entire book. If at the end of the book, it could be a single bibliography organized by author's last name or a series of bibliographies divided up by chapters. There are a number of potential organization schemes that can be used for providing source listings.

Book Reviews

Books of note most likely will be reviewed and the reviews published in book trade publications, newspapers, and journals. *Booklist*, for example, is a twice monthly publication that specializes in providing reviews of books in a wide variety of disciplines and written for varied audiences, including both non-fiction and fiction. Many newspapers, such as the *New York Times* and the *Times of London*, will also publish reviews of recent books. Book reviews could be written by subject specialists or by professional reviewers who have no single subject specialty. While reviews will not be the sole determinants of the value of a particular work, they can help a researcher get a feel for what type of information can be found in a book and what caliber of writing to expect from the book's author.

Where to Look:

Library Databases Specializing in Book Reviews. The best known source for book reviews is the *Book Review Digest Plus*, an online database common to most libraries that provides excerpts of reviews published in magazines, newspapers, and journals. Another database common to libraries that could include links to reviews is the *Books in Print* database.

Printed Book Review Indexes. Older books might not have reviews in online sources, so a researcher might need to consult a printed index of book reviews in order to identify reviews published a considerable number of years back. Examples of these include the *Book Review Digest* and the *Cumulative Book Review Index*.

Subject Databases and Indexes. Academic journals in every field might also include reviews of books being currently published in the discipline. A researcher has a number of available options for identifying reviews within a discipline, the quickest being to search a database specific to the discipline. For example, the history databases *Historical Abstracts* and *America: History & Life* both index reviews of history books. These databases will provide history researchers with quick means for determining whether a book under consideration has been reviewed. Both of these databases also have print counterparts. Also useful for finding reviews of history books, *Reviews in American History* is available both as a print publication and as an online source. The *JSTOR* system is a full text article database that provides access to academic journals in a multitude of disciplines. *JSTOR* can also be used to locate book reviews. Even multidisciplinary databases like *ProQuest Central* can be used to locate book reviews, not only in scholarly journals, but in magazines, trade publications, and newspapers.

Publishing Information

Every research project should reflect the most recent information obtainable. While older sources can also be of value, a researcher should strive to identify the most recent sources for any topic being researched. While it might seem not quite as necessary to find current research on topics in literature or history or art, it is every bit as necessary to look for current materials on these subjects as well as on subjects that reflect rapid growth and change, such as computer science and robotics and medicine. For example, the years old controversy over whether Shakespeare actually wrote Shakespeare is still alive

and well in academic circles and current materials can be easily located on this topic. Questions of authorship have been raised since the middle of the 19th century and have included speculations that at least some of Shakespeare's works were written by Christopher Marlowe or by Edward De Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford. Finding updated works that explore this topic is, of course, necessary. The quickest way to identify the recency of a publication being considered as a source is to look at the front portion of the book, specifically the title page or its verso, to find out when it was published.

A researcher might also want to look into information about the publisher of the book being evaluated. Is it a popular press, a commercial press, or an academic press? Publisher directories or even publisher websites will help a researcher determine what type of publisher is issuing a book under consideration. Academic/scholarly publishing houses and even commercial publishers that have an academic focus are most likely to specialize in publishing books that have an academic focus and thus are appropriate for academic research.

While many books will make their particular focus abundantly clear in the initial pages, not all publications do. It might take a bit more digging on the researcher's part to really get a good feel for whether a source is truly appropriate for the task at hand.

Reading by Jim Alderman. Updated March 2014.