

# Evaluating Sources II: External Indices of Significance

While it is mandatory that you do a close reading of a source before attempting to evaluate it, you will also need to look at factors that are external to the actual content of the source.

There are several ways to evaluate the significance of a source, including determining how other authors have cited the source and investigating the author, the publication, and/or the historical context.

## **What will I learn by reading this guide?**

This guide introduces some of the ways you can begin to evaluate significance. It will answer some common questions about techniques that are important and useful when investigating a source.

# Impact

**Q:** What can I do to see if an article has been important to scholars looking at my question?

**A:** Checking to see if an article has been used as a source by other high-quality scholarly articles published in peer reviewed journals helps you get a sense of how important an article has been in a specific scholarly conversation.

These articles can sometimes help you identify the limitations of a source, either because another scholar approaches a similar question differently or because the scholar explicitly criticizes your source. Perhaps most importantly, this practice can also help you discover new sources related to your topic.

**Q:** How do I find other sources that have cited an article?

**A:** To find articles which cite a source:

- Begin by looking in *Web of Science* for citations in top tier journals.
- Then look for citations in a larger pool of journals and other periodicals using the **Cited by** feature on *Google Scholar*.
- Note that some databases include more limited citation information, including *EBSCO* databases (including *Academic Search Complete*), *JSTOR*, *PubMed*, and *PyscINFO*.

## Keep in Mind

It is tempting to begin citation tracking with *Google Scholar* because it has very broad coverage. Unfortunately, this is also a liability; often, too many sources of low quality occur in the search results. For this reason, it is usually better to begin with *Web of Science*.

# Reputability

**Q:** How can I tell if the article was published in a reputable journal?

**A:** Some journals are more reputable than others. In fact, some journals are rarely read or cited by scholars and serve primarily as a way for young scholars and/or graduate students to inflate their credentials.

To determine if a journal is reputable, look first at the *Journal Citation Reports* tool. Be sure you are looking for the journal title, not the article title.

For example, if you are working with the article "Whose Knowledge, Whose Nature? Biodiversity, Conservation, and the Political Ecology of Social Movements" by Arturo Escobar from the *The Journal of Political Ecology*, you will search for *The Journal of Political Ecology*.

If the journal is included in *JCR*, compare the impact factor, journal rank, and/or eigenfactor of this journal to other journals in the field.

## Keep in Mind

If the journal you are looking for is not included in *JCR*, you can try to google its title to find out more about it. Journals associated with national and international academic organizations are generally more important than those associated with regional organizations, single universities, or graduate programs.

# The Journal

**Q:** What should I find out about the journal?

**A:** Use a web search engine to find out who sponsors the journal. Many journals are overseen by a group with defined ideological, political, or material stakes in a specific perspective. Sometimes journals are quite explicit about what perspectives they publish.

You may find, for instance, that an article about labor history is published in a journal funded by a specific union or that an article about government inefficiency is published in a journal funded by a libertarian think tank. This does not mean that you should dismiss these articles as biased, but understanding this context is important when evaluating the claims in the article.

Many journals are published by academic or professional organizations. Knowing more about these organizations can help you better understand the intended audience.

## Keep in Mind

Elsevier, Wiley-Blackwell, Springer, Taylor and Francis, Sage, Ingenta, and Nature Publishing Group are publishing companies. While the control of a few publishing companies over academic publishing is a topic of some debate, it is not particularly important to the content of most articles. Sponsoring organizations are generally more important to identify and find out about than these publishers.

# The Author

**Q:**What should I find out about the author?

**A:** Find out what organizations or groups have funded a scholar in the past, any relevant past employment or institutional affiliations, and whether the author has published other relevant articles or books.

You may find, for instance, that a scholar writing about the conservation of rainforest plants is an ethnobotanist working for a pharmaceutical company. This does not mean that you should dismiss this scholar's work as biased, but it does provide context through which you can better understand his or her claims.

Alternatively, you may find that an author making a controversial claim has a long track record of contributing to widely-cited articles to a field or to a scholarly conversation; this may encourage more careful consideration.

## Keep in Mind

The article may include a funding, acknowledgements, or conflict-of-interest statement. If so, spend some time using *Google* to explore the funding. But keep in mind that not all journals require such statements and that such statements do not necessarily exhaust the ways that institutional affiliations, employment, and past funding can shape an author's perspective.

# Context

**Q:** Is there anything else I should find out about the article?

**A:** Yes.

To really understand a source, in addition to the author's background and the reputability of the publication, it is often a good idea to find out more about the context in which the article was published.

You may not use all of the information you find, but this background helps you assess and compare competing claims and perspectives. Occasionally, you will learn something that will encourage you to be more critical of a source than you might otherwise have been.

**Q:** What should I learn about the context?

**A:** It is a good idea to put an article in historical context by considering its date of publication.

- Consider the broader social, political, economic, or cultural context. Were there events or developments that would affect the research design or the reception of the article?
- Consider also the more narrow scholarly context. Which important articles in the field were published before or after this one? Have you noticed any trends in the literature published around this date? Were other scholars looking at similar questions at this time using similar methods or theories?

## Keep in Mind

While it is very important to research and analyze the author, journal, and context, be sure that this process does not prevent you from carefully reading, analyzing, and evaluating the underlying source itself.