



## Assessing Source Credibility for Crafting a Well-Informed Argument

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# 13 ASSESSING SOURCE CREDIBILITY FOR CRAFTING A WELL-INFORMED ARGUMENT

*Kate Warrington, Natasha Kovalyova, and Cindy King*

## OVERVIEW

This article walks students through how to use critical reading strategies to help them select credible sources for their research papers and helps them understand how critical reading assignments they may have completed earlier in the semester have prepared them for the difficult task of selecting sources. Through analysis of how logos, ethos, and pathos are used in potential sources, students will understand that these persuasive techniques can influence the overall credibility of a source. Seven questions are presented that aid in critical reading, and examples of student writing are provided that demonstrate the connection between the use of persuasive techniques and their effect on the credibility of a particular source. The chapter concludes with a brief evaluation of two Internet sources on the topic of animal shelters, providing students with an anchor for evaluating sources as they prepare their own research papers.

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**I**n your writing course, you're likely to encounter a variety of assignments—reading, responding, writing essays—and each of these assignments is a building block to improved writing skills.\* Research writing requires all of the skills learned in these kinds of assignments; it demands you put theory into practice, gather sources, synthesize them, and lend your voice to the ongoing conversation.

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## CRITICAL READING FOR WRITING

### ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY

You've probably noticed that establishing credibility (ethos) is one of the most important things an author can do, and nearly every aspect of the essay—its audience awareness, organization, and content—can affect the author's credibility. Therefore, when determining the credibility of published sources for your research paper, you'll have to be thorough and focused. Even though you may not realize it, if you have engaged in discussions or written responses to assigned readings in the past, you may already have had plenty of practice assessing an author's credibility. For example, take a look at this excerpt from Jack's reading response. Jack is responding to Dorothy Allison's essay "What Did You Expect?" that was assigned in his Composition I class:

I feel that Dorothy Allison is a very creative and honest writer, who believes in the importance of writing about the truths of life...she doesn't have any qualms talking about where and how she was raised. Even though she is a very accomplished writer, Allison is very self conscious of how people perceive her. Her childhood seems to be the cause of her low self-esteem and inadequacies which are stated in her writing... I was happy to know that Allison decided to go with a photo shoot of her in a Laundromat. This is showing that she is a down-to-earth everyday person, which to me is more appealing than an unrealistic Barbie doll figure that a lot of famous women try to personify. In sticking to her guns about not doing the powdered sugar photo shoot, Dorothy Allison is proving that she is not a sell out, and has moral value and self worth. (Jack (pseudonym). Reader Response to "What Did You Expect?").

Jack has approached this reading assignment as an active and engaged reader. He evaluates Allison's credibility in the essay and uses examples from the text that lead him to the conclusion that "Dorothy Allison is a creative and honest writer." Jack recognizes that Allison is an "accomplished writer" who is well-educated. He learns these facts by reading the introduction to the essay that included facts about Dorothy Allison, a writer whom Jack was not familiar with before he read this essay. Jack takes this information with him as he reads the text and looks for other clues to Allison's credibility as an author. Allison's willingness to share information about her childhood, and her "down-to-earth" quality that she expresses

in her writing despite her apparent fame persuades Jack that what Allison writes is genuine and important.

The qualities Jack looks for in Allison's writing to evaluate her credibility are qualities that you can use to evaluate any author's credibility. You can ask yourself:

1. Who is the author?
2. How do I know that he/she is knowledgeable about the subject?

In Jack's case, he knows who the author is because he read the introductory material, and he believes Allison is knowledgeable about the subject because she writes about herself in a way that Jack perceives to be honest and forthright. It doesn't hurt that Allison writes about herself, a topic that any reader would expect Allison to know more about than anyone else.

Determining the credibility of an author can involve more than just knowing the author's credentials and whether or not they are knowledgeable about the topic. Authors establish credibility with the way they construct their arguments. If an argument is illogical or seems to be biased in some way, this damages the author's credibility. One common mistake writers make is to represent only one side of an argument, which could make the audience believe that the author is either not knowledgeable about other possible arguments or not interested in these arguments. If an author is forthright about presenting a biased viewpoint, then you might believe the author to be more credible than one who claims to be presenting both sides of the story but does not.

## **ASSESSING SOURCE BIAS**

The way authors choose to make their point is also important when evaluating sources for credibility. For example, you've probably seen the ASPCA commercials featuring melancholy music and heartbreaking pictures of sad or abused animals. The goal of these commercials is to persuade viewers to donate money to the ASPCA—and the appeal to emotions is hard to miss. The ASPCA and homeless pets have certainly benefitted from the generosity of viewers whose heartstrings were tugged by the use of emotion in these commercials.

Appealing to the reader's emotions (using pathos) can be very effective at helping the reader connect to the author's main point, but when we select sources for research projects, we must make sure that an author's appeal to emotion is not a sign of bias. Biased sources may cause readers to feel guilty about holding certain viewpoints or engaging in certain activ-

ities, which may be the goal of the source. For example, Lisa writes in her reading journal about Kasper Hauser’s “Skymaul”—a parody of the Sky-Mall catalog that used to be found in most airlines’ seatback pockets. She understands that Kasper Hauser is poking fun at consumer culture while realizing that she is an active part of that culture:

We don’t necessarily need any of the things advertised in the media or even in magazines though we more than often desire the things that might not even benefit our everyday lives... I find the pepper self-spray quite ironic; maybe it’s just me but sometimes I feel like I’m actually pepper spraying myself when I purchase such things like are sold in the Skymall catalogue because maybe it just wasn’t worth it or it didn’t function as advertised. (Lisa (pseudonym). Reader Response to “Skymaul?”).

In her response, Lisa knows that Kasper Hauser is presenting a particular side of the argument about consumer culture. Viewing the parody makes her feel a bit stupid for participating in this kind of culture—like she’s “pepper spraying” herself. Kasper Hauser’s “Skymaul” is biased because it only presents one side of the argument about consumerism, and it makes the reader aware of his or her place in the culture the group critiques—even causing the viewer to feel guilty or stupid for being part of that culture.

Using biased sources in your research can be problematic, particularly if you do not acknowledge that the source is biased. When you are engaging in critical reading assignments and/or evaluating sources for your research, ask yourself these questions to determine the degree to which a source is biased:

3. Is the author using emotional appeals/manipulation in his or her argument?
4. Does the author use “loaded” language to distract readers from relevant reasons and evidence?

Sometimes authors dismiss opposing arguments by claiming that these arguments are “uninformed” or “nonsensical.” Some less savvy authors will be as bold as to claim another viewpoint is “stupid.” Watch for these kinds of words because they are signs of bias.

## EVALUATING AN ARGUMENT'S SUPPORT

How authors put arguments together and what support they use to bolster their arguments can affect the credibility of the source. If an author makes an argument that remains logical and consistent from beginning to end, then readers are likely to be persuaded. When an author presents an illogical argument or an argument that seems to change as it develops, the author's credibility and persuasiveness is damaged. For instance, in John Freyer's "All My Life for Sale" some readers might sense that the stated purpose of the essay doesn't seem to match up with its tone. Telling his story, Freyer reflects on a project where he set up a Web site and sold all of his belongings over the Internet. He kept track of where many of his belongings went and attempted to visit his old belongings and the people who purchased them. While the reader might appreciate the author's creativity and a sense of adventure, deriving further "gains" from the initial project and publishing an essay might appear to some as merely a promotional campaign. A cautious reader might even suspect a hidden agenda behind the Freyer's project in which personal attachments were mined for money-making opportunities.

Despite Freyer's disclaimer that his motivations were more complex than just to make some money, readers who believe that his project as a whole and his essay in particular is an attempt at self-promotion will be questioning the essay with the following:

5. Is the support for the argument appropriate to the claim?
6. Are all the statements believable?
7. Is the argument consistent and complete?

Like questions 1-4, questions 5, 6, and 7 also can help you to determine whether an author is credible; these three questions address whether the argument is logically acceptable. The more logical an argument is, the more likely the reader will be persuaded.

When you evaluate a piece of writing using these seven questions, you are using critical reading and thinking skills. These are the same skills you will use when you are evaluating sources for the research essay you are preparing. You are going to want to establish your own credibility in your writing. If you use sources that aren't credible, then your own credibility will suffer.

## FINDING SOURCES

While searching for sources, you will be making a lot of decisions. Some of them are easy; others are tough. Yet, regardless of what your decisions are going to be about—the focus, the argument, the support materials—at the core lies your credibility as a writer. In fact, there will be two kinds of credibility to juggle—that of your sources and that of your own. If you want to come across as a knowledgeable writer, the company you assemble (that is, the sources you bring in) will speak volumes about you and your understanding of the subject.

Striking as it might sound, credibility is not an innate quality. Credibility is established. Demonstrate a firm grasp of the matter at hand, and your audience will perceive you as a knowledgeable person, worthy of their attention. Show that you know who argues against your case, and your audience will take your argument more seriously. “But what if I am not particularly knowledgeable about the subject matter?” you might ask. “What if I am making my first scholastic steps?” Well, there is plenty of good news for you: good sources *lend you their credibility*.

How do you find good sources, then? Earlier in this chapter, we listed seven questions that can help you to determine the credibility of your sources:

1. Who is the author?
2. How do I know that he/she is knowledgeable about the subject?
3. Is the author using emotional appeals/manipulation in his or her argument?
4. Does the author use “loaded” language to distract readers from relevant reasons and evidence?
5. Is the support for the argument appropriate to the claim?
6. Are all the statements believable?
7. Is the argument consistent and complete?

These questions will help you select the sources that contribute best to your credibility as a writer. You may come across an insightful comment on your topic in a book, on a flyer, in an email, or a blog. You may hear important information in a radio program or on a late-night TV show. No media should be banned from your search effort, but you should be very picky about making the source yours. Remind yourself that sources are people and that you are about to jump into a conversation they have been having. To do so effectively, take a critical view of their conversation first. In other words, evaluate your sources.

Evaluating sources and critical reading go hand-in-hand. You read a piece critically in order to understand it. You evaluate the same piece in order to make an informed decision about “inviting” the writer to have a conversation with you on a topic. Simply put, when evaluating, you “read with an attitude” (Palmquist 49). The following advice might be useful:

Accept nothing at face value; ask questions about your topic; look for similarities and differences in the source you read; examine the implications of what you read for your research project; be on the alert for unusual information; and note relevant sources and information. Most importantly, be open to ideas and arguments, even if you don’t agree with them. Give them a chance to affect how you think about the conversation you have decided to join. (Palmquist 53)

Okay, given the variety of sources and the virtual sea of information, do you have to read and evaluate all sources in the same way? The short answer is, “It depends.” The general rules of critical reading and evaluating apply to the majority of sources. However, as more and more information is posted on the Web, additional precautions are needed.

Let’s revisit, for a moment, the library setting. You have probably been told that print materials collected by librarians have great advantages. They are of a high quality because librarians review and carefully select books and journals for the library to buy. Library collections are systematically organized and cataloged. In case you are having trouble navigating the collection, the library staff can help you find what you are looking for or suggest where to look.

These are all good points. But libraries and print materials do have some disadvantages. Collections are limited by the physical space and the budget. Libraries cannot buy all the books printed in the world nor can they subscribe to all periodicals out there. They specialize in some subjects, while collecting very basic materials in other fields. To find a movie that came out, say, in the early 1940s, you might need to travel to a place that holds a copy of it or use the interlibrary loan system and borrow it for a short period of time.

Don’t online resources have an advantage here? Yes and no. When your computer is connected to the Internet, you have a world of information at your fingertips. Type in a search term, and hundreds, if not thousands, of documents appear on your screen in a split second. News that broke an hour ago, game schedules, flight information, stock quotes, currency exchange rates, current temperature at your location, a list of courses offered at your school next semester, a menu at a nearby restaurant—you can access all that without leaving home.



In addition to being conveniently accessible, online information comes from a variety of sources that sometimes rival those in a library. Videos, audio files, and images all reside on the Internet. Say you are writing about global warming. In addition to scholarly journal articles, news briefs, environmental agencies' reports, statistics, transcripts of Congressional hearings, activists' blogs and discussion forums, a simple Google search can also bring you videos, maps, PowerPoint presentations, and the like. To find all those resources in one library would be very difficult, if not impossible.

The Web, however, has its own disadvantages. One particularly notable concern is that because anyone can upload materials online, no one can be assured of their quality. No trained staff is out there to assist you in sieving through what you have pulled onto your screen. The sheer volume of information might be overwhelming, making you sometimes feel that there exists nothing of value on your particular topic.

There is no shortage of materials—both online and in print—as you have found by now. But which ones are good ones? To make that determination, it's time to be as picky as possible, scrutinizing the structure of their argument (logos), their motives and agendas (ethos), and their fair use of emotional appeals (pathos).

When you are writing a research paper, you will be expected to do precisely that, and more. You will also need to enter in a conversation with your sources and respond to them rather than report what they are saying. While your audience will, no doubt, benefit from knowing what experts have said, they are reading your paper and are interested in hearing what you have to say. Listen to what your sources say (that is, *read* carefully and critically) and try to understand their position. Then, agree or disagree, draw parallels between their views and yours, ask questions and take sides. Translated onto a written page, your conversation will take the shape of your quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing. By doing so, you will be contributing to the discussion with your own observations, questions, comments, and concerns.

### SELECTING SOURCES SAMPLE TOPIC: ANIMAL TREATMENT

Let's explore the topic of animal treatment. After watching an ASPCA commercial, you decided to explore the topic of animal shelters. Your interest in the topic was piqued by a brief memory of a handmade poster you saw earlier at a gas station. "Emily Missing," you remember it saying. Judging by the picture, Emily happened to be a kitten that ran away. "What if someone found Emily but had not seen the poster?" you won-

dered. Someone could have tried to return her to her owners if she wore a tag, or Emily could have been turned in to the nearest animal shelter or humane society. With Emily's fortune at the back of your mind, you want to learn more about animals in animal shelters and possibly write your findings in a paper.

You have a zillion questions to ask. How many animal shelters are currently in operation in the United States, or even in a given state? How many animals are kept there? What are the most common animals in a shelter? Do most animals in shelters get adopted? How do shelters ensure that an animal goes to good hands and not to abusive owners or research labs? What happens to those who cannot find a new owner because of their age, illness, or behavioral problems? How do shelters raise money? What happens to animals when a shelter cannot house them any longer?

Following in the steps of dozens of your fellow classmates, you opened a Google search and typed in "animal shelter" (see figure 1). Among the top results, you saw links to your local animal shelters and other rescue organizations.

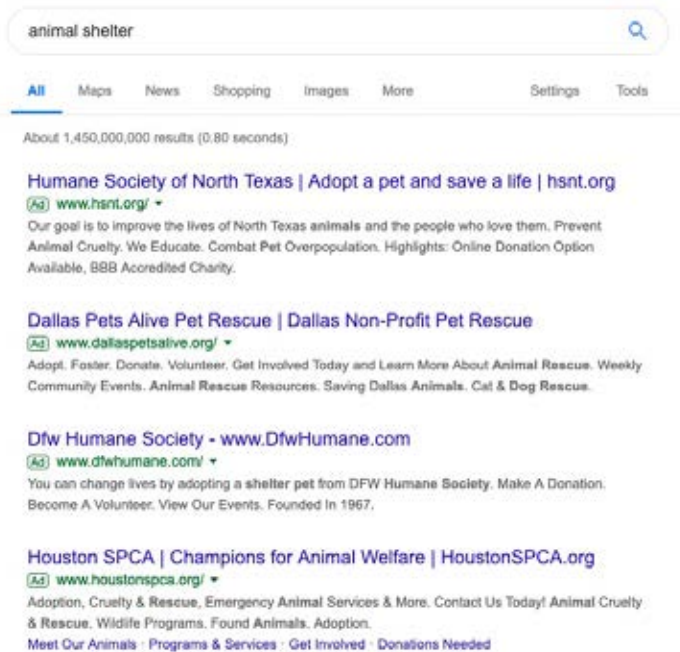


Figure 1. Google search for "animal shelter" shows several ad results, including "Humane Society of North Texas," "Dallas Pets Alive Pet Rescue," DFW Humane Society," and "Houston SPCA."

When searching for “animal shelter,” you receive more than one billion results. You are now faced with a formidable evaluation task, but you can’t possibly look at all of these sources. You could choose to narrow your search terms to something like “animal shelters and lost pets” (which yields 66,200,000 results) or take Google’s apparent suggestion and focus your search on animal shelters in your local area. Let’s say you decide to focus on the Humane Society of North Texas, the first result from your original search (see figure 2).



Figure 2. The Humane Society of North Texas homepage shows the organization’s logo, a basic navigational menu, and a photo of a large dog looking out a car window into the camera. Text next to the dog encourages viewers to donate their vehicle in support of the Humane Society.

To guide you during this evaluation process are the critical reading questions that we discussed earlier.

1. Who is the author?
2. How do I know that he/she is knowledgeable about the subject?
3. Is the author using emotional appeals/manipulation in his or her argument?
4. Does the author use “loaded” language to distract readers from relevant reasons and evidence?
5. Is the support for the argument appropriate to the claim?
6. Are all the statements believable?
7. Is the argument consistent and complete?

### USING THE QUESTIONS TO DETERMINE CREDIBILITY

Just by looking at the homepage, it is clear that the Humane Society of North Texas sponsors and maintains the site. After clicking on some of the

more specific links on the top of the page, you locate some press releases that name individual authors and their titles. For example, if you clicked on the item “Newsroom” from the drop-down menu under “Home,” then on the press release titled “We Like Big Mutts and We Cannot Lie (Ok-Cats, Too!),” you will be directed to the page shown here in Figure 3. Notice that the author is Cassie Lackey, who is the Director of Communications for the Humane Society of North Texas. Because Lackey works for the Humane Society of North Texas, she likely has access to accurate information about this organization. Her role as Director of Communications is to inform the community about news related to the Humane Society, so from what we can tell so far, she appears to be a credible author (see figure 3).



Cassie Lackey  
 Director of Communications  
 Humane Society of North Texas  
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 Email: [communications@hsnt.org](mailto:communications@hsnt.org)

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**We Like Big Mutts and We Cannot Lie  
 (Ok-Cats, Too)!**

**Fort Worth, Texas, May 24, 2019:**  
 The [Humane Society of North Texas](http://hsnt.org) (HSNT), will fly over 160 dogs and cats on Saturday, May 25, 2019, to Washington and Idaho. HSNT is partnering with Wings of Rescue, GreaterGood.org, and the ASPCA® (The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals®) to fly pets to the Pacific Northwest, where adopters are excitedly awaiting big and small furry friends alike! Flying large dogs to other states will ease overcrowding in HSNT's shelter.

Large dogs are surrendered to HSNT consistently and abundantly. What HSNT has recognized is the majority of large dogs coming through its doors are much harder to adopt into homes due to their size. Larger dogs are susceptible to spending longer times in the shelter waiting for their forever homes. There is a tremendous need for adopters and fosters of large dogs. To learn more about the available pets at the Humane Society of North Texas, visit [hsnt.org](http://hsnt.org).

"The Humane Society of North Texas is beyond grateful for these lifesaving flights. We desperately need to find homes for our larger dogs," said Cassie Lackey, Director of Communications at HSNT. "As our intake continues to grow, we need to pursue finding forever homes and placement for the voiceless pets in our care."

Figure 3. “We Like Big Mutts and We Cannot Lie (Ok-Cats, Too!)” press release was found by following the “Newsroom” link from [hsnt.org](http://hsnt.org). The release discusses a partnership with several organizations that will allow them to fly larger dogs to other states to be adopted, thus increasing rates of adoption. Source: The Humane Society of North Texas.

While it appears as if this source has a credible author, we should look for other clues to help us feel certain about its credibility. The extension .org in the URL indicates that this Web site is not set up for commercial purposes—that is, not for deriving profit from the activity on the site. In fact, the central features of the site are the menu items at the top of the home page: Adopt, Services Volunteer, and Donate. The information appears very straightforward and oriented toward a clear purpose: to help people adopt animals or volunteer their time and money to help homeless animals.

By now, it's easy to conclude that *hsnt.org* may be a useful source if you live in the North Texas area and want to focus your research on local animal shelters. But, you can't hang your hat on just one source.

After browsing through several local animal shelter sites, you expand your search and click on the Web site for the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA): [www.peta.org](http://www.peta.org). The banner has a direct slogan: "Animals are not ours to experiment on, eat, wear, use for entertainment, or abuse in any other way." That slogan provides some insight into the mission of the organization. The breadth and depth of information you find here is impressive: feature stories, news briefs, files on a series of animal cruelty issues, factsheets, blog posts, and a sizeable collection of videos. It is here, however, that a peculiar approach to presenting information becomes prominent, namely, the extensive use of celebrities to attract attention and (hopefully) advance the organization's cause.

You might also notice that on this site a lot of effort is put into raising awareness about animal cruelty and stirring grassroots activism. You will find tips for activists, templates of correspondence to send to public officials, and news of upcoming events. Does that constitute a bias? Well, it definitely points to a well-shaped agenda, and you need to recognize that, whether you agree or disagree with the mission the site is promoting. Without doubt, some of the material you come across can be considered controversial. Therefore, when you consider the question, "Are all the statements believable?" think not only about your own assessment of the material but also about what your audience may think. If your audience believes that some of the source material you choose to include in your paper is not believable, then your credibility will be damaged. After carefully evaluating PETA's Web site, you will likely decide that while it contains some useful and credible information, you will need to use this site with care and acknowledge its agenda.

All information that you have discovered so far is valuable, but you know that to write a well-informed research paper, you'll have to search further.

## CONCLUSION

To succeed as a researcher, and ultimately a persuasive, credible writer, you have learned that you can't fly solo—that, in fact, no one can go it alone. You will come to understand that strong, well-defended arguments need support, just as, for instance, most singers need a solid back-up band. And like any good front person, you should audition and choose carefully those who will stand behind you. In other words, interrogate those sources. Ask the tough questions. If you do so, you can resist the charges of loaded language, recognize when sources tug at your heartstrings, and leave unreliable statements behind.

This chapter has taken you step-by-step through the process of how to critically evaluate your sources. With practice, this type of thinking will become a natural part of your approach to both assigned reading and research material as well to what's outside the classroom. And the more critical you are in your reading and research, the more it will become a part of how you view the world, be it in the classroom, online, or virtually everywhere. This ability to encounter the world with a critical eye is a valuable tool, one that allows you to more fully engage with it. And your capacity for determining credibility can help you make informed decisions in your writing, work, and life.

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## TEACHER RESOURCES FOR ASSESSING SOURCE CREDIBILITY FOR CRAFTING A WELL-INFORMED ARGUMENT BY KATE WARRINGTON, NATASHA KOVALYOVA, AND CINDY KING

### OVERVIEW AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

This essay is ideally taught in preparation for collecting sources for research writing and provides a nice scaffold for students who have already engaged in some critical reading assignments or reading responses prior to being assigned a research writing assignment. The flow of activities was designed to support students in introductory composition, although the topic of source evaluation fits well at all levels, across the curriculum. Recognizing a widespread practice among college students to Google their topics, we have found it critical to introduce students to some concrete ways to evaluate all types of sources since we've found it to be unlikely (and impractical) to prohibit the use of Web sources.

### QUESTIONS

1. How, if at all, do sources dealing with certain subjects and/or arguments call for a more rigorous scrutiny of credibility? For example, do those that are emotionally charged demand a closer look? Do sources in highly specialized fields require you to scrutinize the structure of their arguments more carefully?
2. To what extent should you consider an author's credentials when determining his or her knowledge of the field, and ultimately the credibility of the source? When, for example, might a source written by a layperson be as valuable as one by an expert in the field? How might you compare, for instance, an article on juvenile delinquency written by a legislator to one produced by a social psychologist? How might you treat a book written by a physician who is also a TV personality?
3. Do certain subjects, purposes, and audiences allow for a less critical evaluation of bias? How, specifically, might you determine when sources use emotional appeals without bias?
4. What further challenges do Internet sources pose when it comes to gauging their credibility? How, for example, can you evaluate

credibility when a Web site's content comes from an indeterminate source or multiple authors?

5. In what situations, if any, might you disregard credibility of a source? If a source lacks credibility according to your examination through critical reading, does it always mean you shouldn't use it? How, if at all, might you use a source that lacks credibility in your essay?

## ACTIVITIES

The following are two class activities that can help students put to action the advice and steps for critical reading discussed in the essay.

### CRITICAL READING PRACTICE

To get students more comfortable with reading academic writing, have them practice these skills in small groups in a low-stakes environment. Hand out a short scholarly source (3 to 5 pages) on an accessible topic and give them time in class to read it. Then divide them into small groups and ask them to apply the seven questions presented in the essay to this source. Once they have done so, they present to the class their recommendation about whether the source is credible, and if they would or wouldn't use it in their research paper. These presentations typically generate a vibrant class discussion.

### WEB SOURCE EVALUATION PRACTICE

Since most students feel comfortable using the popular Internet to find sources for their research, offer them an opportunity to work through credibility of Internet sources during small group work in class. Ask each small group to choose a topic (it can be a topic they plan to work with for their research paper) and conduct an Internet search for sources on that topic. Once they have located a source that they believe looks like it has good information, ask them to locate basic information like the author/sponsoring organization and publication date. In many cases, this information will be difficult to locate, which not only helps them to prepare for the challenges they may face citing Internet sources, but also helps them to take a second look at the credibility of Internet sources.