

# Being digital

## Evaluation using PROMPT

### 1: Introduction

The ever-increasing volume of online information available means it is important to think critically about what you find, especially if you are going to use it for study or work purposes.

You may already have an idea of what is important to look for. This could include relevance, up-to-dateness and reliability. There may be additional measures you need to use when assessing certain kinds of information, for example, what methods were used when carrying out a piece of research.

What if there was some convenient way of keeping these various criteria in mind? Look no further: the OU Library has developed PROMPT, a way of evaluating any kind of information. You can use it in your studies and beyond.

### Learning outcome

By the end of this activity you should be familiar with the six PROMPT evaluation criteria.

## 2: Prompt criteria

Read through the explanations for the PROMPT criteria below. Think about how far these criteria match what you currently do. How might you make PROMPT part of your approach to evaluating information?

### Presentation

- Is the information clear?
- Is the language right?
- Can I find what I need here?
- Is it succinct?

Sometimes what you see may make it hard to judge whether what you have is what you want, or even if it is information worth having. It may be that something which looks insignificant is actually the most important piece of information available. Or it may be that something which looks good on the face of it, is not what it seems. You need to develop the skill of looking beyond the surface appearance.

For example, one of the most famous hoax TV documentaries was broadcast by the BBC in 1957. Viewers assumed that because it was broadcast by a reputable company like the BBC it must be true but they had failed to notice that it was being broadcast on the 1st April and was an April Fools' joke. You can find the whole story on the BBC website at [1957: BBC fools the nation](#).

If you have time, watch the film and see if you can find any clues to suggest it is a fake.

### Relevance

- Does this information match my needs right now? Scan it quickly to get an overview.
- What is it mostly about?

The information in front of you may be of high quality but not actually relevant to the question you are asking or to the scope of your search, for example:

**Level** – it may be too detailed/specialised or too general/simple for the level at which you are working

**Emphasis** – it may not contain the kind of information you are seeking – this is often a question of emphasis, and one which, in the case of a journal article for example, may not easily be identifiable from an abstract

**Geographic** – it may relate to countries or areas you are not interested in at this time.

You can probably think of others that relate to your own subject field.

## **Objectivity**

- It's important to be aware of opinions and hidden agendas.
- What are you being "sold" here? A particular product, a corporate view?
- Is the language used emotive?
- Are opinions expressed?
- Are there sponsors?
- What are they selling?
- What are the vested interests?

The concept of objectivity can be problematic. It is important to develop a critical awareness of the positions or interests represented in what you read. This is especially true of controversial topics such as genetically modified foods, wind farms, climate change or parenting. However, even information which purports to be 'balanced' may have hidden agendas or vested interests.

## Method

- If statistical data is presented, what is this based on?
- How was data gathered?
- Was the sample used really representative?
- Were the methods appropriate, rigorous, etc.?

For example, in **scientific research** it may be appropriate to ask questions relating to sample size, representativeness of sample, control group and outcome measures.

In social **science research** you might want to ask about sample size and representativeness, questionnaire design and conditions under which a questionnaire was carried out.

For **historical and biographical research**, look at what approach has been used and any artistic license, as well as the sources the research draws on.

If you are reading a **review** of research, check whether it is a selective choice by the reviewer (and how did they choose?) or a systematic overview. How has the material been reviewed?

## Provenance

- Is it clear who produced this information?
- Where does it come from? Whose opinions are these?
- Do you trust this source of information?

Provenance provides 'credentials' for a piece of information and supports its status and perceived value.

Knowing the **author** enables you to find out whether they are an expert in this area and what their perspective is (are their views known to be controversial?), find out what else they have published, find out who else has cited their work and perhaps even contact them.

Knowing about the sponsoring **organisation** can help you to understand what their main 'business' is (e.g. commercial, voluntary, research), how well-established it is, who the people involved are, and who they are linked with.

Knowing **how something was published** can help you identify how reliable it is. For example, has it been through an editorial or peer review process by experts in the field? Even if this is the case, you should still evaluate it. Being published in a prestigious academic journal is not an automatic indicator of quality.

## **T**imeliness

- Is this current?
- When was it written and produced?
- Has the climate/situation changed since this information was made available?
- Is it still up-to-date enough?

How important it is to have the very latest information depends on what you need it for.

The date is not always easy to find: sometimes online sources do not have a clearly visible publication or 'last updated' date. Also, even information that is not very old may have been superseded, for example, in the case of regularly produced reports or statistics.

It therefore helps to be aware of the type of source and how often it is produced.

## **Summary**

PROMPT offers a structured method for evaluating any information that you find online.

This is useful if you are looking for information from trustworthy sources to support arguments in an assignment.

You can also use it in a work environment, for example to find material for a project or report.

Finally, think about using the criteria when you are looking for information in your everyday life, such as holidays, medical or legal information or news stories.

You might find it useful to download the checklist from the link below. This is a Word document that enables you to compare information from different sources, against the PROMPT criteria.

### **PROMPT checklist**

<http://www.open.ac.uk/libraryservices/beingdigital/objects/87/media/prompt-checklist.docx>

## **References**

### **Being digital activity**

[Evaluation using PROMPT](#)