

Evaluation using PROMPT

1. Introduction

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

The Open University Library has developed a framework to help you evaluate the quality of any information that you find online. It uses a set of criteria summarised by the letters PROMPT

You can use the PROMPT criteria in your studies and beyond.

Learning outcome

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

2. The PROMPT criteria

Below you will read about what each letter of PROMPT stands for.

Think about how these criteria match what you currently do when evaluating a source.

How might you make PROMPT part of your approach to evaluating information going forward?

Presentation

- Is this information presented clearly?
- Is the language appropriate?
- Is it succinct?
- Can I find what I need here?

The presentation of information can give a clue to its quality. Poor use of language can create a barrier to the information, and the reader may find it difficult to

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understand or follow the arguments. Poor structure and confusing layout can make it difficult to navigate to find relevant information.

Bearing that in mind, try not to be guided by your initial impression. 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 and consider the other PROMPT criteria to fully assess the quality of the content.

Relevance

- Does this information match my needs right now?
- 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.

Consider whether the information has the right emphasis for your topic, and whether the information is at the right level - it might be too detailed or too simple for the level at which you are working. Also check whether the information covers the correct geographical area.

Objectivity

- Is there bias in what you are reading?
- Might the author/s have any hidden agendas? Have they been selective with their evidence?
- Is the language used emotive?
- Are opinions expressed?
- Are there sponsors?
- What are they selling? A particular product, a corporate view?

The concept of objectivity can be problematic. It is important to develop a critical awareness of the views, opinions, 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 implies to be 'balanced' may have hidden agendas or vested interests.

Method

- Is it clear how any research was carried out?
- How was data gathered?

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- If statistical data is presented, what is this based on?
- 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?). You may wish to find out what else they have published, and who else has cited their work. Treat anonymous information with caution.

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.

Timeliness

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

Deciding how important it is to have the very latest information depends on what you need it for. In some disciplines, information can become dated very quickly, where new developments happen daily. That is not to say that that only up to date information is valuable. In some cases, the relevance of the material may be far more important than its age.

Also consider that 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.

3. Summary

Summary

This activity has introduced you to the PROMPT criteria (Presentation, Relevance, Objectivity, Method, Provenance, and Timeliness), which offers a structured method for evaluating any information that you find online.

It is important that you learn how to evaluate information effectively, by constantly questioning assumptions and critically assessing everything you read.

Next Steps

Think about applying the PROMPT criteria the next time you are looking for information. For example, when you are looking for information from trustworthy sources to support arguments in an assignment, or finding materials to write a work report, or when consulting medical, legal or news articles in your everyday life.

You might find it useful to download the PROMPT checklist from the links below. This document enables you to compare information from different sources, against the PROMPT criteria:

[PROMPT checklist \(Word\)](#)

[PROMPT checklist \(PDF\)](#)