MODULE 2: ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY
LESSON 1: THE A-B-Cs OF SCHOLARLY SOURCES

Title
Establishing Credibility
Module 2, Lesson 1
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Introduction
Where would you go to get the news about a hurricane that’s coming to your area? Facebook? The evening news? The website of the National Weather Service? Which of these sources would you trust the most? Why?

A trustworthy source has credibility. When doing research, it’s important to ensure that the sources you select are credible. In this lesson, you will begin learning how to identify scholarly source material for academic research in school.

There are several ways to identify scholarly source material, and a good place to start is by examining prospective sources for certain academic attributes. You can think of them as the A-B-Cs of scholarly sources.

These attributes are helpful in interpreting the level of scholarship. In the lesson ahead, we’ll look at sources and point out these attributes so that you can start to identify them on your own.

Key Indicators
An easy way to remember the key indicators of academic scholarship is by using your A-B-Cs: authority, bias, and content. Let’s get started by investigating the topic of high-stakes testing.

Authority
To have authority means to be recognized as knowledgeable on a specific topic. There’s a root word in “authority” that tells you what you’re going to look at first: “author.” When you’re considering a source, try to find the answers to these questions:

» Is the author or authors clearly identified?

» Does the author have scholarly credentials, or credentials within the appropriate field of expertise?
Is the author’s affiliation apparent, such as where he or she works? If the author is a professor, are advanced degrees listed alongside his or her academic position?

Does the author have qualifications to write on the topic, such as an advanced degree in the field with several years of experience and research on the topic?

Does the publication have an author and an editor? The presence of an editor might imply a collection of articles, as opposed to a single piece by a single person. Be sure to note who the piece is actually written by. This should usually be a person in scholarly works with appropriate credentials.

Occasionally, an organization will serve as the author. In these cases, make sure that the organization has expertise and credibility in the field. You can usually determine this by reading the organization’s bio, the same way you would read about an author.

Take a look at this excerpt from the education journal Theory into Practice. You can see the two authors clearly listed at the top of the page, along with their affiliations at the bottom of the page. Both authors work at well-known institutions, and one is a professor of education. These are good indicators that they have authority on this subject.

Bias

It’s important that academic scholarship is presented in an objective manner without bias. The peer review system is an established way to identify biases that might appear in scholarly research. In peer review, a work is evaluated by experts and published only if it meets the discipline’s standards. It is also a way to ensure objectivity in assessing an academic article.

The peers selected for the review are:

- In the same field as the author(s)
- Proven to be objective and independent from the work they are reviewing for publication
- Familiar enough with the body of work the article relates to in order to lend credibility to the publication of it
- Able to make a formal declaration in the work attesting to their neutrality

In the excerpt from the Journal of Science Education and Technology, you can see a reference to peer review along with the information on what the journal stands for and what it looks for in the articles it publishes. The journal has greater authority because you can rely on its information being unbiased.
Content
By examining the content, you can determine an article’s suitability for scholarly research. Remember to look not only for relevant topical information, but also signs of scholarship. Here are some questions to consider:

» Audience: is the work intended for other scholars or experts in the field? Does it use discipline-specific terminology?

» Intent: why is the author publishing the article? Is it a report, a case study, or an in-depth analysis of a specific topic?

» Level: does the article assume some basic knowledge on the readers’ part? Is it written for peers, or to introduce the topic to laypersons?

» Style: Are there illustrations, charts, and tables? If so, are they relevant to the content or are they “eye candy” meant to attract readers?

» Tone: is it written using a professional tone and an academic style, or is it colloquial and casual, which is a sign it’s not scholarly?

This excerpt from *The Elementary School Journal*, provides information on the source’s credibility. As a researcher, knowing that the article is credible is just as important as finding out what it has to say about high-stakes testing. The title of the journal, *The Elementary School Journal*, doesn’t tell us much about the level of content—but the subtitle of the article, “A Framework for Equitable Learning Opportunities,” gives us a clue that this article is aimed at readers with some knowledge in the field, not at the general public. The article is presented in plain text, without any illustrations. These are all good indicators of a credible scholarly source.

Finally, think about the tone of the abstract. Look at this sentence: “Next, we provide examples of curriculum development and research programs to illustrate key components in the theoretical framework and to highlight how these programs address challenges in curriculum design and implementation.” What are some words that describe the tone of this sentence? You might say it is complex, formal, or academic.

Now, look at this excerpt from another source on the topic of teaching science. “Do the research together with each student recording the information in a chart. Then do a quick discussion, ending with safety tips for each type of danger in your area. Have each student make a button with a safety tip and wear it this week. Or they could make an Earth Science Week button!” What are some words to describe the tone of this piece? You might say it is conversational, accessible, or straightforward. The casual tone of this writing is one clue that it does not come from a scholarly source.
Publisher
We’ve discussed authors and their content, so now let’s turn to the publisher that’s responsible for the end product. The publisher plays an important role in establishing credibility. Without a legitimate publisher, it’s difficult to confirm that a source is credible. When in doubt, look to the publisher to help steer you toward a credible source on which to base your scholarly work, and search for these clues:

» Does the journal list an editorial board?

» Is there a logo?

» Has the journal won any awards? Is it affiliated with a well-known institution?

» Is the blurb on the journal written in a scholarly manner for an academic audience?

Within a scholarly database listing, you will usually find a link that offers information about a journal. Here’s an example from Teaching & Learning Inquiry, published by Indiana University Press. A university affiliation is a good indicator of scholarly content. Notice whether there is a logo displaying the name. Information is included on its mission, editors, and editorial board. The tone is professional and the style is academic.

Next Steps

» Next, let’s move into a few practice activities related to what you’ve just learned.

» Then, it’s on to Lesson 2, where you’ll learn some additional strategies for identifying scholarly sources.

» At the end of Module 2, you’ll take an assessment of what you’ve learned.