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Repository Citation

Jumonville Graf, A. (2023). Surfacing assumptions in source selection: Situating critical reading in first-year information literacy instruction. In H. Gascho Rempel & R. Hamelers (Eds.), *Teaching critical reading skills: Strategies for academic librarians* (vol. 1, pp. 177-187). Association of College & Research Libraries.

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Surfacing Assumptions in Source Selection: Situating Critical Reading in First-Year Information Literacy Instruction

Anne Jumonville Graf

Introduction

First-year students sometimes ask me, “What is the difference between high school and college research?” I am glad they ask. Asking indicates a recognition that new learning environments may call for new approaches to learning and research. But as readers of a book on critical reading will likely agree, there isn’t a single, fixed answer to that question. Perhaps more than anything, what “college research” requires is experience and reflection. Fortunately, a great benefit of librarian-led instruction for first-year students is the chance to provide opportunities to experience and reflect on new ways of learning, including reading.

Teaching librarians may have more chances to provide opportunities for reflection and metacognition (or thinking about the patterns and processes of how our thinking works) than we believe. For example, before we tell students how to select sources for academic projects, we can ask students to identify and articulate the decisions and assumptions they already make when they encounter a possible “source.” To go further, we can name this

process as a type of “reading,” allowing students to understand the many ways reading happens and the many forms reading takes. This offers students the chance to view a database record or a page of search results as a text, one that can and should be approached with a contextual and critical stance. It also allows for more honesty with respect to the types of quick judgments we all make in initially evaluating information sources. Creating such opportunities for added reflection and discussion can help make knowledge and skills gained through experience more explicit to students. By asking students to bring their thinking into the foreground, we support an important first step toward critical reading: acknowledging assumptions.

Critical Reading Connection

Reading is an essential component of the research process and the development of information literacy. If we agree that “successful critical reading requires the identification and evaluation of assumptions within the text and those of the reader,”¹ we can begin to explore a connection between critical reading and source evaluation. Though the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*² does not name learners as readers, there are hints everywhere in the frames of the academic and social traditions of critical reading, especially in relation to evaluating sources. The Authority is Constructed and Contextual frame enumerates several components of evaluating credibility, a core component of the academic tradition of critical reading.³ Evaluating credibility also speaks to the social tradition of critical reading as “recognizing power relations” and “questioning assumptions”⁴ for the sake of social and political transformation.⁵ Manarin, Carey, Rathburn, and Ryland write that “reading for social engagement... requires connections between knowledge and civic engagement and participation or, on an even more basic level, knowledge and personal experience.”⁶ With its nod to self-awareness and self-evaluation,⁷ reading the Authority is Constructed and Contextual frame through the lens of critical reading reminds us that evaluating sources is impossible without also evaluating ourselves.

The practice of critical reading as “surfacing assumptions about text and reader”⁸ not only connects to the purpose of teaching source evaluation, it also guides the approach. If critically aware source selection and evaluation depend on both contextual awareness and an awareness of one’s own assumptions, then a simple checklist-driven model for evaluating sources misses an educational opportunity. Library literature is full of thoughtful critiques and alternative approaches to the checklist-driven model of source evaluation,⁹ including specific references to first-year student instruction.¹⁰ Situating source evaluation as a form of critical reading corrects some of the problems in checklist-driven evaluation techniques.

A further connection to critical reading for first-year students specifically comes from calls for a more integrated approach between library-led information literacy instruction and the goals of first-year composition. Carter and Aldridge note that the language for source evaluation, in particular, differs between information literacy-centric librarians and composition instructors focused on critical reading and writing.¹¹ While both languages

have value, without conscious and explicit integration, students may not recognize reading and writing contexts as ones in which source evaluation skills are useful, and vice versa. This problem is compounded for first-year students, who are already maneuvering between high school and college language and contexts.

The question of where and how to do more nuanced source evaluation and, by extension, critical reading may have less to do with a lack of theoretical integration, models, or personal interest and more to do with time—ours and our students'. Librarians who teach do so in a variety of ways, but we typically share at least one thing: the desire to do more than time allows. We might say the same for students, most of whom are juggling busy academic, social, and personal lives. As a first-year experience librarian, I most often teach first-year students in a “one-shot” session tailored to specific assignments and based on conversations with the class instructor. Accordingly, the teaching strategies I present here are designed to fit within and around a single class session. These activities provide students with the opportunity to get at the “why” behind their evaluations—or assumptions—about sources. In surfacing such assumptions and discussing them, students gain the space and support to practice the initial steps of critical reading. For information literacy educators, the activities described below may be familiar in many respects; they include such core tasks as locating, identifying, and evaluating sources. What may be new is framing these tasks as supports for critical reading instruction. Certainly, it will feel different for first-year students, who often are not used to reflecting critically on their own approach to making decisions about sources. But my experience is that given opportunities to practice, they are able to do so.

Teaching Strategies

Strategy #1: Read, Rank, Vote, Discuss!

This twenty-minute, in-class activity creates opportunities for students to articulate how they approach and evaluate possible sources for a given assignment or purpose. The “read, rank, vote, and discuss” format allows students to think for themselves first, identify and commit to a preliminary decision, listen and learn from peers, and re-evaluate their initial thinking. The discussion provides an opportunity for librarians to hear how different students approach the source selection process, offer support and encouragement, clarify misconceptions, and situate the act of considering sources as a type of reading activity that benefits from an iterative, reflective approach.

Student learning outcomes

- Identify and explain how students read for source suitability.
- Learn how others (peers and librarians) read sources to evaluate credibility or suitability for a particular purpose.

Instructions

1. Select one to three sources for students to evaluate. Give students the following instructions:
For each of the following sources, please

- determine the source “type” (i.e., news article? blog entry? book chapter?);
 - examine, identify, and read features of the source that will help you evaluate it;
 - evaluate the suitability of this source on a scale of 1-4; 1 = low quality/not appropriate for this assignment, 4 = top quality/great choice for this assignment; and
 - be prepared to explain your thinking.
2. Provide access to the source (link, discovery path, etc.).
 3. Give students five to ten minutes to examine the source, determine what type of source it is, and make a preliminary judgment about its suitability.
 4. When most students are ready, ask students to reveal their ranking on the count of three. They can hold up fingers or the number on a piece of paper, use chat in a virtual session, etc.
 5. Engage students in discussion, depending on what you want to emphasize:
 - What type of source do they think it is?
 - Why did they rank it the way they did? What qualities or features did they pay attention to?
 - What assumptions did they have to make in order to form a quick judgment about this source’s value?
 - What else would they want to look at or read if they had more time?
 6. Move on to the next source and repeat the activity as time allows.

Facilitation tips

- Do not be afraid to tailor this activity to your and your students’ needs. You can provide citations and ask students to find the articles or sources in full-text for additional practice with known-item searching, or you can provide direct links to focus more attention on the evaluative component.
- While you could use this exercise to really delve into identifying source “types,” I usually do not. Either by show of hands or asking an individual student, I ask students to tell me what type they thought it was and why, making sure we correctly identify it for everyone before moving on.
- When students reveal their rankings, ask them to keep their rankings visible while you make notes for calling on students (e.g., if you notice a cluster of 2s in the corner, or that most of the class is 4s, etc.). I find that students are understandably more willing to share a ranking than explain the rationale behind it, so having a sense of where to prompt the discussion can help. I sometimes start with one end of the scale, e.g., “Let’s hear from a few that ranked this a 3 or 4,” then work your way toward the opposite end.
- Ask specific questions to give students multiple entry points for discussion. “What made you rank this a 3 vs. a 4? What would have made the source more of a 4 in your mind? What was the most promising aspect of this source? What first caught your attention in reviewing this source?” These types of questions can lead to the more challenging questions listed earlier.
- Reiterate that there is no “gotcha” here—that you are interested in why they approach

sources the way they do and in having them be able to articulate this process. To this end, try not to set up the activity with “trick” sources or an obvious right answer. Encourage students to speak up if they had a different process and decision than someone else who has already spoken.

- If it makes sense, collaborate with the class instructor on the source examples. For instance, if there are specific types of sources that the instructor wants to see students use, include those sources. Encourage the instructor to vote as well if they would like to participate, though you may want to wait for them to explain their thinking until after students have had their chance.

Assessment options

- Have students jot down notes or record them on a form/worksheet and turn those in to assess their rationales, or, based on the size of the class, evaluate based on the discussion.
- Assess the impact of the discussion by having students vote again after the discussion and see how rankings change.
- Follow up your discussion by asking students to jot down what they found most helpful from other students’ descriptions of their reading and evaluation process.

Strategy #2: Pre-class Source Selection, In-Class Critical Reading Discussion

This pre-class assignment leads to multiple opportunities for a discussion about critical reading. It could be modified to work asynchronously or with in-person instruction, though I have used it primarily with synchronous, virtual instruction. One week before the session, students with an upcoming research assignment are asked to find and post a source on a possible topic on Padlet (a virtual bulletin board platform). In addition to posting a citation of their source, ask them to include brief responses to questions of your choosing, such as those suggested below.

Student learning outcomes

- Reflect on why a particular topic or source interested them.
- Identify opportunities for further reading and learning by noting questions or confusions.

Instructions

1. Set up a Padlet site and ensure that settings allow for anyone with the link to post. Put instructions and, if appropriate, an example, on the site.
2. One week before the class session, inform students that they will need to find and share a source on their topic before the library session using Padlet (or whatever platform you choose). Use whatever communication method makes sense, such as an email forwarded by their instructor, a message posted in the class LMS, etc. Include resources for help finding sources, such as video or screencast tutorials, if there are requirements for source type.

3. This activity can be directed to emphasize strategies for finding sources. To focus the discussion on critical reading strategies, ask students to respond to specific questions in relation to their source and include those reflections in their posts. For example:
 - Why did you choose this particular source?
 - What other ideas, readings, or experiences did this source call to mind?
 - What about this source confused you?
4. Review student posts ahead of class. Make notes on interesting examples, questions, or specific comments that could lead to further critical reading reflections.
5. Bring up the Padlet in class and ask students to talk about their choices and rationales. Use the discussion as an opportunity to name critical reading strategies students may already practice as well as opportunities they may not have recognized. Discuss next steps to deepen their approach and reading.

Example

These instructions (figure 18.1) prompt students to focus less on how they found an article and more on why it interested them and how it might connect to a topic of inquiry. It also encourages them to name questions or confusions. Although critical reading expands far beyond comprehension of a text, it cannot proceed without it.

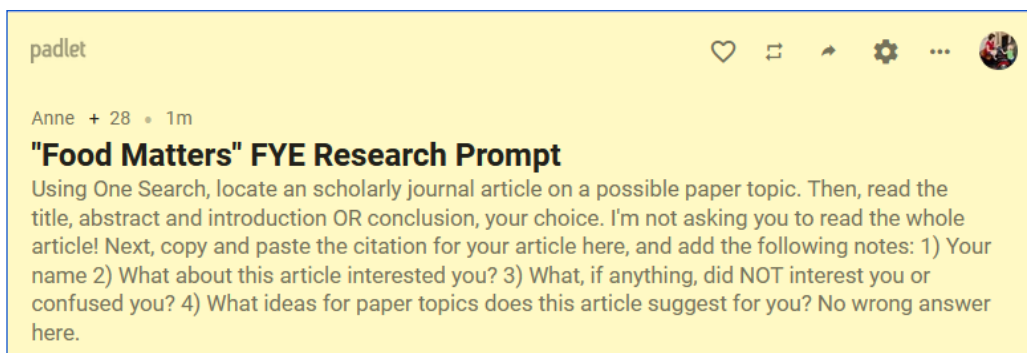


Figure 18.1

Example pre-class source selection prompt directions

Figure 18.2 illustrates an opportunity to explore students' reading for social engagement. This student refers to their own relevant experience as an athlete. They also begin to recognize a gap in the information others have previously provided to them, creating an opportunity for this academic project to serve a potentially empowering purpose.

██████████
 Birkenhead, K., & Slater, G. (2015). A Review of Factors Influencing Athletes' Food Choices. *Sports Medicine*, 45(11), 1511–1522.

2.) As an athlete this article focuses on things that I've thought about before. How do we choose what we eat, and how do those choices affect us.

3.) There was not much to be confused about. The abstract did a good job detailing what would be presented in the paper.

4.) A food topic this could point me towards is the food dilemma for athletes. We are often told to eat certain foods to help our performance but we have little to no knowledge on what these foods actually do for us.

Figure 18.2

Example student source selection and reflection

Figure 18.3 provides an example of an opportunity to discuss elements of critical reading for academic purposes. Specifically, it offers a chance to talk about students' own reading practices, at which point elements of critical reading, such as analysis and evaluation, may be introduced as next steps. Or it might be that further comprehension is needed, such as understanding what type of “direct link” the study describes, and how the student might determine that.

██████████
 Gregory, C. A., & Coleman-Jensen, A. (2013). Do High Food Prices Increase Food Insecurity in the United States? *Applied Economic Perspectives & Policy*, 35(4), 679–707. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aep/ppt024>

2) What I found interesting was the article's theory that food insecurity in the U.S. could be worsening as a result of high prices of food in food insecure locations.

3) So far, I did not find anything uninteresting or confusing to me, then again I did not read the article very meticulously.

4) This article suggests there is a link/direct relationship between prices of foods and food insecurity, so this idea of government involvement in food prices affecting food insecurity is a top contender to be a paper topic for me.

Figure 18.3

Example student source selection and reflection

Facilitation tips

1. Give a deadline for posting so that you have time before class to review submissions.
2. Provide a summary of student posts at the beginning of class, describing what you are seeing across posts.
3. Look for examples that demonstrate students' own critical reading strategies or connections and call on those students first. In my experience, this is the best way to focus the activity on critical reading connections over more general explanations of interest in a source, as suggested in the examples above.

Assessment options

- Use students' posts to better understand how students approach and think about reading selected sources.
- Depending on the size of the class, conduct an informal assessment throughout the discussion, based on student responses, to further assess students' ability to describe their selection rationale.
- For a more comprehensive assessment, students could also be asked to add to their Padlet post in class after the discussion in response to a prompt or assessment-focused question.

Discussion

In addition to what students learn from these activities, I have learned a lot about how students approach sources, and about what they need from me in order to have productive conversations about reading and source selection. For instance, in the “Read, Rank, Vote, Discuss” activity, I used to encourage students to explore and read as much of the full article as possible. I assumed reading or scanning more of the text itself would lead to better analysis. However, I later realized this was putting pressure on students who read more slowly. The Student Accessibilities Coordinator at my university at the time suggested emailing the readings before class, which is a good solution when possible. When it is not, I also found success by simply shifting the tone of the exercise. Instead of asking students to “rank” a source in a definitive way, I asked them to recognize their ranking as a preliminary judgment—in short, to expect that their reading and evaluation might, and should, change, after discussion and upon further reading and re-reading. This seemed to take the pressure off and allow students to describe their assumptions more honestly and to engage more readily in a discussion about next steps. Similarly, when talking about students' source posts on Padlet, I try to unearth not only what they were thinking at the time about their source but also what they are thinking now. This helps refocus the activity on process and student thinking, not the source itself.

Reflection on Critical Reading Connection

Surfacing or “hunting assumptions,” a phrase associated with educator and critical pedagogy scholar Stephen Brookfield,¹² is a necessary early step in critical reading for academic purposes and social engagement. The activities described above are centered on opportunities for students to identify their own assumptions, primarily for the purpose of understanding and evaluating academic sources. But the active components of these activities also create a social context for reading beyond the individual. When students hear their peers discuss why they chose a particular source or what about it excited or concerned them, they are exposed to different ways of thinking. This is particularly important for first-year students. It echoes Angell and Tewell’s recommendation that librarians work toward “involving students in reflection upon the sources they use and investigat[e] their different purposes and intents, question the privileging of peer-reviewed articles and the assumption that scholarly publications are ideal sources, and focusing or structuring one’s teaching activities upon students’ experiences and voices in order to meaningfully invite them to be part of the classroom conversation.”¹³ In my experience, another unexpected benefit of both these activities is the engagement of instructors who remain with their students during library instruction. The language and practice of critical reading make room for their expertise—mine and the students’—as well as for questions and questioning assumptions.

Conclusion

Reducing source analysis to a checklist and student learning to an ability to sort sources by type (e.g., peer-reviewed journal article, Wikipedia entry, etc.) misses an opportunity to think critically about the context in which we read and learn. In order to do this kind of thinking and learn to talk about it, students need opportunities to practice surfacing assumptions about the texts they encounter and the judgments they make about them. Normalizing the fact that we all make assumptions in order to make decisions allows students to talk more openly about their process and potentially open themselves up to new ways of thinking and reading. First-year students in particular need permission and practice to name their assumptions and examine them in a different way than they have experienced before. Since librarians are often in the position of helping students locate and evaluate sources, expanding this task conceptually and framing it as “reading for source selection” allows us to participate in the development of critical readers. That it creates meaningful discussion with other instructors and teaches us something along the way is even better; in doing so, we become a community of more critical readers together.

Notes

1. Karen Manarin et al., *Critical Reading in Higher Education: Academic Goals and Social Engagement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 6.
2. *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, Association of College & Research Libraries, 2015, accessed February 11, 2021, <http://www.ala.org/acrl/files/issues/infolit/framework.pdf>.
3. Manarin et al., *Critical Reading*, 4.

4. Ibid., 6.
5. Ira Shor and Paolo Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1987), 135.
6. Manarin et al., *Critical Reading*, 66.
7. *Framework for Information Literacy*, Association of College & Research Libraries.
8. Manarin et al., *Critical Reading*, 6.
9. Marc Meola, "Chucking the Checklist: A Contextual Approach to Teaching Undergraduates Web-Site Evaluation," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 4, no. 3 (2004): 331–44; Joel Burkholder, "Redefining Sources as Social Acts: Genre Theory in Information Literacy Instruction," *Library Philosophy and Practice* (September 2010): 2–11, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/413>; Alyssa Russo et al., "Strategic Source Evaluation: Addressing the Container Conundrum," *Reference Services Review* 47, no. 3 (2019): 294–313, <https://doi.org/10.1108/RSR-04-2019-0024>.
10. Candice Benjes-Small et al., "Teaching Web Evaluation: A Cognitive Development Approach," *Communications in Information Literacy* 7, no. 1 (2013): 39–49, <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2013.7.1.133>; Mark Lenker, "Developmentalism: Learning as the Basis for Evaluating Information," *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 17, no. 4 (October 2017): 721–37.
11. Toni M. Carter and Todd Aldridge, "The Collision of Two Lexicons: Librarians, Composition Instructors and the Vocabulary of Source Evaluation," *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* 11, no. 1 (March 15, 2016): 23, <https://doi.org/10.18438/B89K8F>.
12. Stephen D. Brookfield, *Teaching for Critical Thinking: Tools and Techniques to Help Students Question Their Assumptions* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 7.
13. Katelyn Angell, Eamon Tewell, and Long Island University, Brooklyn, "Teaching and Un-Teaching Source Evaluation: Questioning Authority in Information Literacy Instruction," *Communications in Information Literacy* 11, no. 1 (2017): 114, <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2017.11.1.37>.

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