

# Lessons for the Gullible Learner

A simple approach to help students evaluate the validity & reliability of information.



By Michael McQueen

“But that’s what it said on Wikipedia... it must be right!”

Such a comment may seem naive and even ridiculous to older generations who grew up when the oracle of all knowledge was the Encyclopaedia Britannica. However, for younger generations, the internet has become such a comprehensive, accessible and immediate source of information that many fall into the trap of believing it is infallible too! After all, if someone has gone to the trouble to put it online and hundreds of people have validated it with their posted comments, it must be true!

There’s an old saying that none of us is as smart as all of us and with the advent of online information sharing, the ‘all of us’ has the 6.7 billion inhabitants of planet earth. While it may be true that everyone has the right to be heard, it is equally true that not everyone has earned the right to be listened to. The challenge for parents and educators is to help young people discern the opinions and information that is worth listening to, and those that aren’t worth the pixels they are printed on. In a recent journal article published in Reference Services Review (a publication for librarians and educators) it was found that Wikipedia returned only 80% accuracy in comparison to well-known reference books which had an accuracy rating of between 95-96%.

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It is often stated that students today are a group of lazy learners. Teachers complain that students see education as little more than a process of playing the game rather than earnestly and critically evaluating information with a view to developing balanced and reasoned perspectives. If this is the case, a simple way to jump start the process of real thought and learning is to offer young people a framework for evaluating and questioning the information that they come across. Borrowing the acronym of a television favourite for today’s students, the simple 3-step questioning process below may be a good start.

In evaluating content, students would do well to remember and apply **CSI - Context, Source and Intent**:

## 1. Consider Context

To determine the context of a piece of information, ask questions such as:

- What year was the information published?
- What could have been learned about the topic since?
- Where did you find the information?
- Was it original material or sourced from another location?
- What were the significant moral and social battles that were raging at the time the information was written?  
In what ways could the information have been influenced by these?

## 2. Secure the Source

Historically, the credibility of the source of information may have been determined through the titles, accreditations or letters after the author's name. While these may be one helpful indicator of credibility, below are a list of questions that can be useful in determining the reliability and validity of an information source:

- Is the information attributed to a particular person or group? If not, why not?
- Who published the information (ie a mainstream publishing house, an industry association, not for profit group etc)?
- What else has the author published?
- How recently have they published other works/information?
- What do others say about the author when you Google their name?
- What groups, associations or movements does the author belong to?
- How many other people quote the author's material in their own work?
- Who does the author quote/reference? What does this indicate about the author's personal influences and biases?
- What beliefs or values could have shaped the authors point of view?

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## 3. Identify Intent:

This final step in the evaluation process is perhaps the most important. While the first two steps have focussed on who, what, how and where of information, the last critical step is to explore the why – why was the information generated and what impact does this have on its credibility? Some helpful questions to ask may be:

- Who was the intended audience for the information?
- What was the purpose of publishing the information? Was it to inform, persuade, enlighten, motivate, manipulate, shock etc?
- What did the author stand to gain for releasing the information (financial reward, credibility, notoriety, publicity, reputation etc)?
- What was the original intended medium for the information (e.g. a blog post, newspaper article, sales brochure or university dissertation etc)
- What did the author anticipate by way of response in the reader?

While it may be true that we live in a wonderful era called the information age, the proliferation of data and media has meant that it **is** more difficult than ever to separate reliable information from spin, propaganda and pop psychology. If there is one skill that today's tech-savvy students need more than any other, it is the skill of learning how to learn. Teaching young people the skills of evaluation, discernment and critical thinking is of critical importance if we are going to set them up to succeed in life.



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