

Basics

When we read something, we need to use our judgement to decide what information (if any) is useful to us. For example, a news story or an article might contain a lot of the writer's opinion, and very little fact. Equally, the facts might be wrong, either deliberately or through a lack of proper research. When we identify fake news, for example, we are using the skill of evaluating.

The academic context

When we read a text for academic purposes, evaluating involves using critical thinking to help us make more sense of the text and choose the relevant information. We often need to identify the main points. We can then focus on using these key points and ignoring unimportant or doubtful information.

Developing the ability to evaluate texts saves us time. This is because we learn to recognize what type of text we're dealing with. This way we can quickly identify useful texts, and dismiss texts that are not to be trusted or are less useful.

You might have to evaluate certain aspects of a text. For example, in literature you might be asked about the writer's opinion or the reason she chooses to use certain words.

Key features

- Use the context to help you. Where did you find the text? Is it written by an expert? Does this publication usually produce trustworthy texts?
- Learn to quickly tell the difference between opinion and fact.
- Use clues in the text to help you. For example, very emotional language usually means that the writing is not objective.
- Learn to identify who the text is addressed to. For example, is it for the general public or for students/specialists?
- Learn to identify bias. Who or what is the writer criticizing? Who or what are they defending? Are there important reasons for their opinions that are implied but not mentioned?
- Make sure the text uses up-to-date information and wasn't written a long time ago.
- Check for references. Does the text mention the work of others in the same field?
- Check that there isn't anything important missing from the text. Opinion-based writing might completely ignore a key point. If a writer ignores important information, maybe she cannot be trusted.

Challenges / difficulties

There are certain problems involved in evaluating texts. This is particularly true on the internet, where a text can look very professional, and yet contain information that you cannot use. The biggest danger is believing something that is simply not true. This can cause problems with your academic work. For example, you cannot base your own academic writing on texts that contain inaccurate information. That would make your writing inaccurate, too.

How can I develop this skill?

Experience is the best way to understand whether a text is useful or not, and the easiest way to get experience is to read as much as possible. The Worksheet contains more ideas about what to look for.

Learning outcome

When you master this skill, you will be better informed. You will save time on research, learn to quickly dismiss texts that are not useful to you, and learn to get the most important information out of a text.

Theory to practice

Read the text and answer the questions about it.

Do we really need this?

Finally, the campaigners have lost, and a new shopping mall is to be built on the outskirts of town. *Another* new shopping mall – as if we haven't already got enough. Gazing into my crystal ball, I can tell you exactly what to expect. I predict great excitement as people all go to have a look; and within a year, the first outlet will close, probably because it was an unsuitable place for that particular store. Others will close, too, either for the same reasons or because greedy landlords have put the (already extortionate) rent up. Then shoppers will stop coming, and most of the other shops will close. Meanwhile thousands of acres of beautiful countryside have been destroyed, to be replaced by an ugly, underused concrete monstrosity. When will we ever learn?

- 1 Does the heading suggest a serious piece of academic work?
- 2 Where would you expect to find this text?
- 3 What purpose does the second sentence serve?
- 4 What does the phrase *Gazing into my crystal ball* suggest about the writer's prediction?
- 5 What is the writer saying will happen? Is this really what will happen?
- 6 What do the words *greedy*, *extortionate* and *monstrosity* tell us about the text?
- 7 Roughly how much of the text is based on opinion, and how much is based on fact?
- 8 How useful would you find this text for research on the development of cities?

Ways to get more practice

The more you read – in every and any context! – the easier you will find it to evaluate texts.