



Cambridge English

Teacher Development

Distinguishing between reliable and unreliable sources by asking 'Wh-' questions

Aims

- To practise distinguishing between reliable and unreliable sources by asking questions about different types of digital texts

Materials required

- Handout (see below)

Appropriate for

- Teachers with any level of experience

Applicable to learners

- CEFR B1 and above

Nowadays, learners can find all the information they need without leaving their desks. This poses a challenge when deciding which sources are reliable and which are not. Critical thinking skills can help with evaluating the reliability of information.

One way to do this is by asking 'Wh-' questions about a text.

Who?

Who wrote the text? If the author is well known in their field, then the information is probably reliable. If we do not know who the author is, do we know anything about the writer (or the organisation)? Some organisations, including newspapers and journals, do not write the name of the author, but information in a well-respected publication is likely to be reliable. However, if the author is 'Anon' or is not well known in the field, we cannot necessarily rely on it.

When?

When was the article published? An old article may have been superseded by more recent research. Alternatively, an old article that is a seminal work may be a very good source of information.



What?

What arguments does the author present and what evidence is used to support them? Is specific research mentioned or are general research findings or their own opinion presented? Do other authors (and I, the reader) agree?

Where?

Where was the information published? If the information is in a peer-reviewed journal, it is likely to be reliable, but with self-published information (e.g. on a website or blog) more caution is needed.

Why?

Why was the information published? If it was published to provide information, for example to convince people to buy a product, there may be evidence of bias.

How?

Another aspect to consider is how the information is presented. We need to consider the style and register of the language. For example, is persuasive or subjective language used?

Task

Give learners the handout below and ask them, in groups, to evaluate the five sources of information for reliability by answering the questions on the handout. Elicit ideas from the different groups then provide the answer sheet.

An alternative way of doing this task would be to split the class into five groups and to give each group one of the texts on the handout below. In this case, each group analyses their text and presents the results to the rest of the class. This can be done either as a presentation at the front of the class or by forming new groups comprising one person from each of the original groups. The members of the group then present their findings to the rest of their group. In this case, it is a good idea to check that the answers that each group has are correct before they share information with other groups or the rest of the class.

Suggested answers

1. Blog by Cool Kelly

Who?	There is no information about the author. He or she could be very knowledgeable, but we have no way of knowing.
When?	Very recent, but it is still necessary to see if the content itself is up-to-date.
What?	General comment and personal opinion.
Where?	A self-published blog site rarely has particular reliability itself.
Why?	Personal interest in the subject. Possibly self-publicity.
How?	Expressions such as 'certainly', 'dominate', 'it will not be long' are subjective and intended to influence the reader's attitude to the subject without any support.
OVERALL	Reliable: Yes / <u>No</u>



2. Blog by George Freeman, Professor of Technology, Mid-Western University

Who?	Assuming that the institution is a proper university, the author appears to be reliable.
When?	Not very recent, but even in such a dynamic field, probably recent enough for most purposes.
What?	The personal opinion of a professor in an appropriate field will usually be sufficient to be reliable. A survey is also mentioned.
Where?	As mentioned for the first blog, a self-published blog site rarely has particular reliability itself. However, as the author is likely to be well known in the field, the information is likely to be reliable.
Why?	Personal interest in the subject. Possibly self-publicity.
How?	The information is presented in an objective manner. The word 'dominate' could be considered persuasive, but it is supported by 'sales figures'.
OVERALL	Reliable: <u>Yes</u> / No

3. Newspaper article

Who?	The reliability of this text will potentially depend on the name of the journalist and the actual newspaper. Few individual journalists have the opportunity to build up a certain reputation though, so the more important 'who' is probably the newspaper (see below).
When?	Very recent, but it is still necessary to check that the content is also recent.
What?	The only named source is an 'IT blogger' who you would have to subject to the same 'wh-' questions as in this exercise.
Where?	The writing style is quite dramatic and suggests one of the more populist papers.
Why?	It is the business of newspapers to publish stories that will be of interest to readers. Some papers may be politically motivated to report a certain angle on a story. Other stories might be simplified or dramatised, depending on the kind of newspaper, as appears to be the case here.
How?	The information is presented in a dramatic manner. The word 'prove' should always be used with caution. The text seems to want to create a feeling that existing technologies have virtually been replaced already.
OVERALL	Reliable: Yes / <u>No</u> , probably not.

4. Newspaper article

Who?	The reliability of this text will potentially depend on the name of the journalist and the actual newspaper. Few individual journalists have the opportunity to build up a certain reputation though, so the more important 'who' is probably the newspaper (see below).
When?	Not very new for such a product.
What?	There is a suggestion of support for the sales figures, but not for the statement about business users.
Where?	The writing style is less dramatic than the previous article, suggesting a more 'serious' newspaper.



Why?	It is the business of newspapers to publish stories that will be of interest to readers. Some papers may be politically motivated to report a certain angle on a story. Other stories might be simplified or dramatised, depending on the kind of newspaper. This article seems more objective than the previous one.
How?	The information is presented in a balanced manner, with no extreme language.
OVERALL	Reliable: Yes / No However, as the information is quite old, we should look for more up-to-date information.

5. Company web site

Who?	A company employee on behalf of the company.
When?	Quite old for a source about IT.
What?	There is vague support for the comment on the market trend, but otherwise it is a series of unsupported statements.
Where?	This information appears on the web site of a company that manufactures touchscreens. It is therefore promotional material for the company.
Why?	It is in the interests of this company to create a positive atmosphere about their products, so a degree of bias must be assumed.
How?	The information is presented in a subjective, persuasive manner, as would be expected in such a text.
OVERALL	Reliable: Yes / No , because the information is relatively old (for an IT product) but also because a one-sided opinion is presented.

Further reading

Cottrell, S (2005) *Critical Thinking Skills*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Center (2010) Evaluating sources. On: Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Center. [Online.] Available at: <http://knowledgecenter.unr.edu/help/manage/evalsources.aspx> [Last accessed 22 December 2013.]

OWL (2013) Evaluating sources: overview. On: Purdue Online Writing Lab. [Online.] Available at: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/553/01/> [Last accessed 22 December 2013.]



HANDOUT TASK 3 – Distinguishing between reliable and unreliable sources by asking ‘Wh-’ questions

Exercise 1

Read the five texts below and discuss the following question with a partner.

- *Which texts do you think are reliable and which do you think are unreliable? Why?*

Blog by Cool Kelly – yesterday

Touchscreens are certainly going to dominate computing in the future. Microsoft showed the way with Windows 8 and it will not be long before all computers are equipped with touchscreens. I predict that it will hardly be possible to buy a ‘normal’ screen in two years’ time.

Blog by George Freeman, Professor of Technology, Mid-Western University – six months ago

Whereas sales figures show that touchscreen devices already dominate the market for mobile devices, surveys such as the one conducted by Instigia Market Research last month seem to indicate that there is little appetite for touchscreens in the desktop market, especially for business users.

Newspaper article – last week

The latest sales figures prove that touchscreens have already forced the old-fashioned screens from the market. IT blogger, John Smith, predicts that ‘If you want a “normal” screen, get it now, because you won’t be able to get one for much longer.’ Retailers who still hold stocks of the old technology are predictably playing down the issue, saying the screens will be available for plenty of time yet.

Newspaper article – four years ago

Recent sales figures from IT Consumer Research show that touchscreens remain a niche product for first adopters. There are signs that sales might be improving in some areas, but as Professor in Technology Systems, Peter Duran, notes: ‘until a desktop operating system designed for touchscreens arrives, demand for touchscreens will be limited.’

Company web site – one year ago

Insight touchscreen range takes off!

Sales of our Insight touchscreens for desktop applications have soared, doubling over the last six months. This underlines the trend we reported on last year and shows that touchscreen technology is going to be the dominant force in computing in the coming years. Feedback from our customers gives us confidence that the market for touchscreens will easily meet expectations and continue expanding over the next five years.



We can evaluate texts better by asking certain ‘Wh-’ questions:

- **Who** wrote the text? Is the person well known in the field?
- **When** was the text written? Is it an old text or a new text? Could the information have changed since the text was written?
- **What** evidence or research is presented to support the argument? What do other authors think? What do you think?
- **Where** was the information published? Was it in a peer-reviewed journal? On a webpage? On a blog?
- **Why** was the information published? Does the text provide balanced information (i.e. are both sides of an argument presented or just a one-sided view)?
- **How** is the information presented? Is the language formal or informal? Does the author use persuasive language or is the language neutral and objective?

Collecting the answers to these questions will help us to judge whether the text is reliable or not.

Exercise 2

Now complete the tables below for each of the five texts above.

Blog by Cool Kelly

Who?	
When?	
What?	
Where?	
Why?	
How?	
OVERALL	Reliable: Yes / No

Blog by George Freeman, Professor of Technology, Mid-Western University

Who?	
When?	
What?	
Where?	
Why?	
How?	
OVERALL	Reliable: Yes / No

Newspaper article

Who?	
When?	
What?	



Where?	
Why?	
How?	
OVERALL	Reliable: Yes / No

Newspaper article

Who?	
When?	
What?	
Where?	
Why?	
How?	
OVERALL	Reliable: Yes / No

Company web site

Who?	
When?	
What?	
Where?	
Why?	
How?	
OVERALL	Reliable: Yes / No



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