HNRS 2000
RESEARCH & EXHIBITION
Evaluating Sources

It's one thing to *locate* possible sources of information. It's then another to determine *how good* they are. As advanced as some search tools have become, you still want to remain the final *reliable* judge of how good a source might be.

At the end of the day, experts in their fields have a whole wealth of knowledge from which to evaluate the quality of a piece of work or an information source. They know where credible sources come from; they know where they are generally disseminated; they know how to place a source *in context* (purpose, intended audience, level of rigor, etc.). Finally, they have their own knowledge as a guide: they can read the source itself to determine the quality of its content.

For beginners, frameworks and rubrics have been established as "recipes" to follow, as you gradually navigate your way through information sources in your discipline. As with searching, these frameworks are useful to an extent, but what will truly let you graduate past them is your *conscious use* of these frameworks and taking note of what you discover so that you can use this later.

For example, once you have identified an individual, quality source, consider: what factored into its quality? Its author? Its publisher? Its own cited source? You can use these observations later when encountering work with similar characteristics. Conversely, if you flag some sources as not-so-reliable, take a moment to think: what made them that way? Were they too old? Did they have an agenda other than the dissemination of knowledge? Was the work *sponsored* (or, to put it bluntly, *bought*)? Just as with the positive traits, these negative traits will help you waste less time, eventually, on similarly low-quality sources that you might find later.

But beyond that, to the frameworks. RADAR is widely used at this university. Yes, it's a mnemonic. It stands for:

Relevance
Authority
Date
Accuracy
Rationale

We don't need to repeat material here that is already captured very well in university resources, particularly those released by the Hannon Library. So we defer to those for the details.

At the end of the day, it's true that quality is ultimately about the *content*. There have certainly been moments were brilliant leaps have come out of nowhere, from the unlikeliest and least authoritative of sources (case in point: the mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan), but in the end, it takes true expertise to evaluate content in a vacuum and most of us don't have that (yet). So, it remains worthwhile to put the *content* in *context*, and for that, following the RADAR recipe will save us time and headache as we learn to sort out the quality of the sources that we find.

Here is an alternative framework for the quality of fiction: http://xkcd.com/483
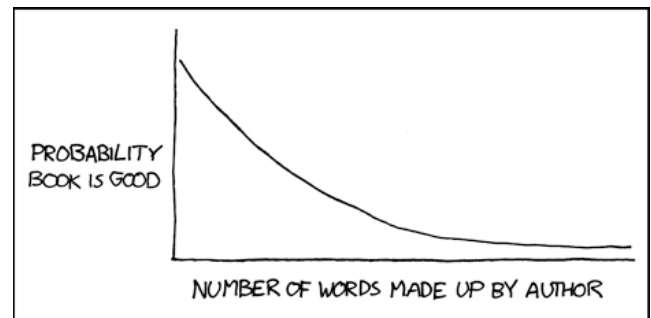
"THE ELDERS, OR *FRAÁS,* GUARDED THE *FARMLINGS* (CHILDREN) WITH THEIR *KRYTOSES,* WHICH ARE LIKE SWORDS BUT *AWESOMER...*"

…with Lewis Carroll and Tolkien being the rare exceptions :)