How to Score a Perfect 10

To evaluate research and sources of information, consider the answers to these 10 questions.

**1. Authority: Who’s behind it?**
Research is only as good as the authors. Are they qualified to be writing about the subject, by either education or experience? Are they well-respected in their field? Were they paid for their research? By whom? That “someone” just might have a perspective on the issue, which might color the results of the research. The publisher matters, too. Is it a recognized mainstream publisher or a respected university press? Or is the material self-published or put out by a publisher that has a reputation for a particular perspective in its products?

**2. Reliability: Is it accurate?**
Accuracy is the stock-in-trade of legislative research, so learn to evaluate the quality of resources. Does the information make sense and appear to be accurate in comparison with other resources on the same issue? Is it presented logically? Is it well-written? Was the material edited or peer-reviewed? Does it contain references, sources or a bibliography? Data sources should be provided for all charts, graphs and statistics. That allows you to evaluate the reliability of the original sources and

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the method used for gathering the data. A healthy skepticism will serve you well, because even trusted sources can sometimes let you down. Misinformation and disinformation are growing problems. The number of retractions and corrections has increased in recent years, even in reliable journals and studies, and most often it’s because of faked research or manipulated data.

### Scope: Is it comprehensive?

A publication that is thorough about an issue has a higher level of credibility than one that seems incomplete. Determine whether the publication covers the subject in a thorough way. If there are gaps in the coverage, it might indicate that the authors don’t have a good understanding of the issue or are possibly leaving out facts that would weaken their arguments, which might indicate bias. Either way, it should raise some red flags about using the material.

### Purpose: Why was it written?

Intent matters. In the words of the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts.” Facts can be verified, while opinions are interpretations of facts. Learn to spot the difference, which may not be as simple as it sounds. Common sense helps here: Do you get the sense the author is trying to inform you or persuade you? If the purpose of the information is to convince you of a point of view, that might be a problem, unless that is what you are seeking. Knowing the target audience for the publication may be useful in determining its intent.

### Currency: What is the time frame?

Legislators always need the most up-to-date information available. Be sure to check the publication date on resources. That’s often easier with print resources and harder with online resources. Publication dates are almost always provided at the beginning of printed studies and reports, but also take note of dates that may be different on accompanying charts or statistics within the report. With online resources, dates can be more of a mystery, as some pages won’t have a date. Even with dated Web pages, use caution as the date may not reflect when the publication was written. It might be when it was posted online, or when it was last updated, or it even might be the current date. A couple of tips: If there is no publication date, but there is a bibliography, check the dates on sources in the bibliography, as that gives some idea of when the material was compiled. Also, if you’ve found a great 50-state chart but it’s three years old, consider doing an enacted bill search for the intervening sessions, to bring the chart up to date.

Online Resources Require Extra Care

Remember The New Yorker cartoon with a dog in front of a computer? He says, “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.” It’s true. The Internet gives a false legitimacy to anyone who can type and pay for a Web page. So, along with the usual cautions in evaluating information, there are additional questions to consider for Internet resources.
What kind of site is it?

Start with the domain: Is it a .gov, .edu, .org, .com, .net or something less familiar? Government and educational sites tend to be more reliable, while .org sites may reflect only the viewpoints of the organization. That’s not to say .org sites shouldn’t be trusted (think ncsl.org), but be mindful of potential biases, especially with special interest or advocacy groups. As for .com sites, remember these are commercial sites and the material available will reflect that. Also take note of any ads on online pages. If they relate to the content of the page, that may indicate an interest group is sponsoring the research.

Who are you dealing with?

Knowing who you’re dealing with and what’s behind Web resources are vital. Most sites include an “about us” button, where you can get background, history and the group’s perspective. A word of caution: Many research organizations and think tanks describe themselves as nonpartisan, but that may not be entirely accurate. Check out their publications, press releases and research papers to learn where they are coming from. Look for buzzwords that can provide an idea of the organization’s perspective. Sometimes something as simple as checking out the board of directors or what organizations they link to will give you clues about their purpose and perspective.

Is it real or artificial?

Astroturf, that slick artificial material that mimics grass, refers not only to sports fields but also to the practice of using a front group, often presented as a “grass roots” organization, to mask the identity of the real backers of an issue or campaign or to hide financial connections. Research from astroturf groups should be considered biased, unless proved otherwise. Nothing could be more embarrassing or potentially career-damaging than presenting your boss with a research study from one of these artificial special interest groups without knowing the origins of the group. It’s definitely worth the time to investigate them and their background.

Who’s allowed to edit?

Although great minds may work together, when it comes to legislative research, crowd-sourced resources such as Wikipedia should be avoided. Wikis have interesting information on just about any subject, but because fact-checking is usually open to the public and editorial control is often limited, these are not proper reference materials for legislative use.

Where can I learn more?

Want more? For an entertaining and informative look at evaluating information resources, check out the recent webinar presented by legislative librarians. There are some eyebrow-raising, real-life stories about research mistakes and misconduct that will help you develop a healthy sense of caution.

To view the webinar, go to www.ncsl.org/magazine.