



## CWU Family History Handout: Checking Your Sources

In the age of the internet, finding information has never been easier. But how can we tell which sources can be trusted? Here are some basic guidelines to help you to judge whether a source is reliable or not.

**What are the author's credentials?** What expertise does the author have? Are they affiliated to a college or other institution? Have they published peer reviewed articles or books? Do they cite other major works on the subject? Do they have any financial stake in the subject? Do they work for an organisation with a particular agenda?

**Who published the source?** Was it published in a peer-reviewed journal? Is it published by an organisation with particular agenda or stake in the matter? If it is a book, is it by an academic publisher or one with a more sensationalist stable of authors?

**What are others saying?** Always seek to verify information from other sources. Read around the subject to get multiple view points and make sure to include any well-known or trusted sources. Try consult both primary and secondary sources. Remember even primary sources will be influenced by the context of their creation and the opinions of those commissioning or writing them.

**What about confirmation bias?** It is easier for us to accept information that reinforces our existing beliefs rather than that which challenges them. This is called confirmation bias and we are all susceptible to it. Good quality research requires us to explore all sides of the argument before coming to a conclusion.

### Websites

Websites offer a very wide range of sources. Even when searching online you should still use academic sources such as JSTOR wherever possible but there will be times when you use a search engine such as Google and then you need to be particularly vigilant in checking the credibility of your sources.

**Who is the author?** You should be wary of any website that does not identify an author. If you cannot identify the author then you cannot check their qualifications their reasons for posting, any organisations they may be affiliated to or other factors which might bias their findings.

**Who is the publisher?** Who publishes or hosts the site. If this is not clear try deleting the url from the right until you get to the source page. The web address will have a suffix that indicates the country where it is hosted and the nature of the organisation, for example **.gov.uk** would be the UK government, **.org** might indicate a non-profit organisation, **.edu** an educational institution, or **.com** a business. Think whether the organisation hosting the site is a well-known and reliable source.

**Is it accurate and objective?** Can the information claimed to be factual be corroborated through references to known reliable sources. If the sources of information cannot be checked the site should not be trusted.

**Does it have a particular point of view or bias?** Having a particular viewpoint or cause is not necessarily a bad thing but do they make their purposes clear? Check if there is an About Us page to explain it? Is their use of information clear and honest? Or is it used selectively and shaped by their purpose. Do they use inflammatory or pejorative language?

**Does advertising influence the content?** If advertising appears on a web page this might encourage exaggerated claims or sensationalist content to attract more views (click bait). Some website even use infomercials which make it difficult to differentiate between genuine information and advertising.

**Does it follow good research standards?** Does the research position itself within wider debate? Does it reflect previous contributions and does it build on or challenge those positions in a well-argued and referenced manner? Do the references support the argument or are they used selectively or misrepresented? Do references reflect the current state of the debate or does the author rely on a few selected sources from one particular point of view?

**Can we trust Wikipedia?** If you are looking to get a quick overview of a subject and find sources of further reading the Wikipedia can be really useful, but because the information on Wikipedia can be provided by anyone, they are not always experts and mistakes can sometimes be up for a while before being spotted and corrected. Occasionally deliberate hoaxes are posted. This should not stop you from using it but it should encourage you to check references and read around the subject.

**What about video content?** If using podcasts, YouTube, TikTok or other social media posts video, a podcast, or any other type of social media it is important to check them just as rigorously as any other sources. Are the presenters or guests really the experts they claim to be? Do they cite their sources? Can you check them? How is the site funded? Does it have an agenda?