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## Online Literacy Skills Applied to the Sources You Cite

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Peggy L. Chinn

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Scholarly publishing and publication literacy has always been a realm of knowledge that is absolutely essential for everyone who engages in education. This starts at the preschool level when youngsters are first introduced to the idea that there is a difference between what can be taken to be “true” and what is safely assumed to be “false.” Once students start taking on the challenge of writing “term papers,” part of the learning process is how to select reliable and trustworthy sources of information. Learning to discern the worth of sources multiplies the more advanced and sophisticated the student becomes. Now, however, everyone involved in academia faces new challenges, even those of us who have achieved

what might be called “academic standing”—graduate students and the faculty who supervise graduate studies. The proliferation of information on the World Wide Web means that we need to be familiar with cues that indicate possible flaws in Internet sources, and many academic units have developed guidelines to teach students how to determine if a web source contains reliable and trustworthy information.

With the internet came open access publishing, which resulted in a tsunami of challenges for those who seek trustworthy scholarly sources—a challenge that articles in *Nurse Author & Editor* have addressed repeatedly (INANE “Predatory Publishing Practices” Collaborative, 2014; Nicoll & Chinn, 2015a; Owens, 2015). Part of this has to do with simply shifting from print literacy to digital literacy (Nicoll & Chinn, 2015b). Most of the attention so far has been focused on predatory publishing, and how to avoid the trap of publishing your work in journals produced by dishonest publishers.

However, it is also necessary to be wary of the sources you cite, those that you rely on as a basis for the development of your own ideas. This requires being informed about the pitfalls of predatory or dishonest publishing, but taking a close look at any source, particularly online sources, to determine if it can be trusted as a reliable source is essential in developing your own scholarship.

Print publication provided, and still provides, certain built-in barriers to deceptive practices and poor quality, the main one being the cost of publication and distribution of print media. Those of us who grew up learning print literacy acquired an almost automatic “trust” of anything published, just because it was published on paper. Print literacy did call for a measure of skepticism that questioned the credentials of authors, the reputation of the publisher or the journal, cues for any indication of a conflict of interest that might bias what was published, or reporting that fell short in terms of method or logic. But mostly, consumers of print have

tended to believe that if something was published, it has a measure of credibility and the standards of skepticism may be ignored, or only “lightly” applied.

As those involved in higher education migrated to the realm of online information, the tendency to trust what has been published has spilled over. Most people recognize that the kind of traditional skepticism related to print media is still called for, but there remain huge gaps in the extent to which people exercise even the traditional literacy skills of skepticism. Further, they either knowingly or unknowingly lack essential online literacy skills. Even more alarming, all too often I encounter someone who expresses a casual refusal to recognize that the trustworthiness of any source are multiplied exponentially when it comes to sources available online. Perhaps when an article appears online to download as a portable document file (PDF), it acquires an aura of “print” credibility!

The fact is that being published in print does not guarantee credibility, and most people who are involved in academic careers know this to be the case despite a general tendency to trust print sources. Most people also recognize that the credibility of information published online calls for a heightened level of skepticism, but many people who consume online information related to their scholarship are still struggling with how to know the difference between what is credible and what is not. It is foolhardy to ignore this challenge, and to ignore the serious threat to scholarly integrity that exists every time anyone fails to recognize the flaws in any published work—print or digital. Most students and faculty are eager to avoid the pitfall of failing to discern that which is credible, and certainly no one wants to believe that they can be drawn into a trap involving less-than-credible sources. However, my interactions with students and faculty in many different contexts reveal a persistent lack of online literacy skills and even surprise at the extent of the challenge. The following sections describe three different types of sources you

are likely to find online, the kinds of cues to look for in identifying their flaws, and what to do with the information you find.

## IN PLAIN SIGHT

In this situation you do not have to look far—you can plainly see the signs and symptoms of the problem. This kind of source seems all too obvious, with the literacy standards you would use for any print source being called on! But amazingly, I have seen this kind of source cited or mentioned as possibly worthwhile. You stumble upon an article that is related to your topic, with an intriguing title. The first clue is that you *stumbled* on this, perhaps even found it as a source someone else cited. But even if you think the “stumble” is not a problem, it does not take long to detect that there are problems. There are a few versions of this kind of source:

- Reading the first few lines of content, you see poorly constructed sentences, poor grammar, typographical errors, misspelled words—any or all of these!
- You do not detect major problems with grammar or writing at first, but as you read the first few paragraphs you realize that the content is not exactly making sense—it is just poorly written.
- In the “plain sight” case you typically see problems with the citations and references used—poorly formatted references and perhaps obvious errors in the sources cited.

Typically, if you look at the journal in which the article is cited, it will be one that is published in a dishonest or predatory journal. But for articles that are this obvious, you can safely assume that no credible journal would publish such an article (see the next section for more on assessing the publication itself).

What to do with the obvious? Do not cite, and do not recommend to anyone else! The only good reason to keep the item around is to use it as a teaching tool, that is as an example of how easy it is to detect this kind of source.

## **THE PALPABLE**

These are sources that are not quite so obvious—you have to palpate or perhaps even do a bit of sleuthing—to determine if it is a credible source. You might detect a few issues with the writing, such as passages or sections that do not quite make sense, but overall, you find the ideas worthwhile, although perhaps poorly expressed but a bit novel but worth considering. In this case, what are your next best steps?

This is a case you will definitely want to check the publisher of the journal to determine if it is a credible journal. If you go to the journal website, you are likely to find “in plain sight” kinds of cues that should put you on alert. Some of the most common are poor English, lack of adequate information about the journal’s peer review process, missing (or unknown) editors or editorial advisory board members, sketchy guidelines for authors, inconsistent prior publication in the journal, and missing information about archiving of previously published works (Laine & Winker, 2017). If in doubt, consult your librarian!

Examine the references that the authors of the article cite. If you detect any discrepancies, if the citations are outdated, or if you know of much better sources related to this topic, then you may have a clue that this article is not itself a good source.

Here is an example from a 2011 article a student recently presented for discussion.

- The authors of the article cite an article published in 1994 related to a key idea.
- However, the authors of the cited 1994 article first published their work in 1990 and 1991, and the ideas were more fully developed by a third author in 1995.
- The 1995 source is the most prominent source related to this key idea but it is not cited in the 2011 article.

This kind of assessment of the sources cited uncovers an inadequacy in the 2011 article that might occur even in a credible source. However, given the fact that we also determined that the article was published in a predatory journal, this evidence adds to the conclusion that this is not a credible source despite the fact that the ideas in the article are at least plausible.

What to do with the palpable? If the article is published in a journal that is not credible, set it aside and do not use it. If there are truly ideas worth considering, search further to find credible sources that explore these ideas, and use them as your sources instead.

## **THE ITCH**

These are articles that are truly borderline—they are well written, contain good ideas that are sound with good foundations. But the “itch” article appears in a journal that is published by a predatory or dishonest publisher, perhaps one that seems a bit “borderline.” You have made a thorough assessment of the quality of the article, the sources cited in the article, and determined that based on the article content, it is credible. You have confidence in the author, whose credentials and expertise can be verified. But you have also confirmed that the publisher of the journal lacks credibility as a publisher, and in examining other articles published in the journal, few measure up to the quality of this article. This may be a case of an article that had already been submitted to at least one credible journal, and for

some reason the author (probably unknowingly) turned to the predatory journal for publication.

What to do with the itch? Scratch it a bit, but at this time my best advice is to set this article aside and do not cite it. Find other works by this author that might be suitable sources to cite, or contact the author to find out more about their work. You might even opt to cite information from the author as personal correspondence. The bottom line is that you should not cite the predatory journal, as doing so provides legitimacy to the journal and publisher, which in turn contributes to the problem that is the crux of this entire discussion.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, I have explained extending your online literacy skills to develop the ability to vet each and every source you cite in your own work. This might seem like a mammoth challenge at first, but the more you use these skills, the better your scholarship will be, and the less daunting the task becomes. Further, using these skills to cite only legitimate, credible sources helps to ensure the rigor of the knowledge base for nursing, and to stop the erosion that is occurring because of predatory publishing practices in the discipline.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peggy Chinn, RN, PhD, FAAN is Editor-in-Chief of *Advances in Nursing Science*, author of a few books, and manager or co-manager of several websites/blogs, including [INANE](#). She is an Author-in-Residence for *Nurse Author & Editor*.

2018 28 3 4 Chinn

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