

Open educational resource 1: Learn how to identify and check sources of information

Learning outcomes:

- Associate topics with documentary sources
- Rigorously evaluates the reliability and quality of sources
- Searches for, selects, and retrieves sources
- Seeks alternative sources
- Understands the importance of specialized products
- Works in teams to gather information
- Reconstructs information and arguments from different sources
- Assesses various content curation tools
- Applies social systems

INTRODUCTION

Sources of information in the journalistic world

In a digital ecosystem where anyone can create, disseminate, and share content, it's crucial to carefully consider the source of information before granting it credibility. Without a legitimate source, any information may lack value. For example, if someone shares an interesting piece of information with you, it's likely that before believing it, you'd want to know where that information came from, right? This is because the reliability of the person telling you the story can influence the likelihood of its truth.

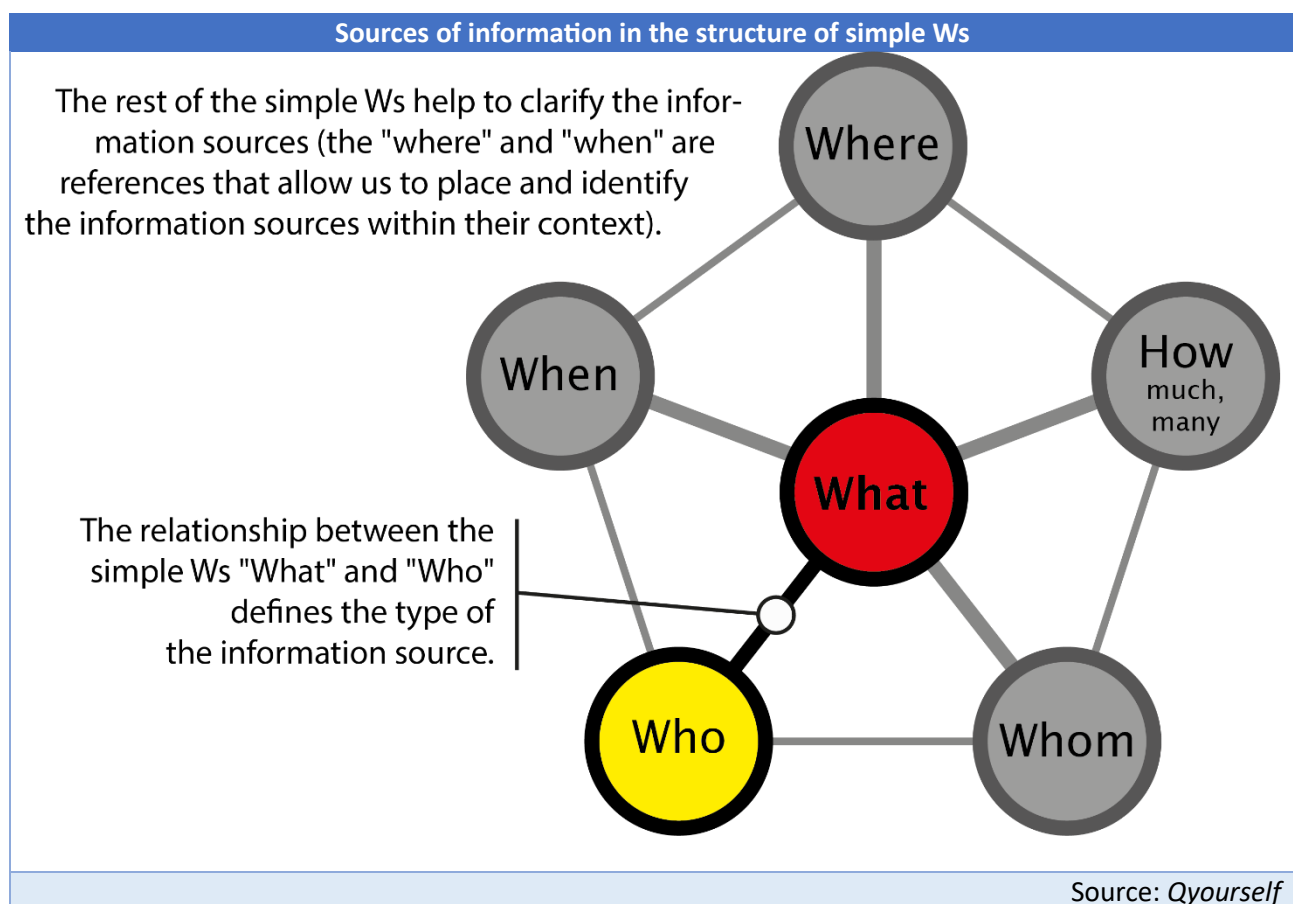
That's why it's important to verify the origin of seemingly informative content before drawing any conclusions. This leads to a question: Who is the provider of the information, and what are their sources? The Internet is full of stories, some true and others not. Paying attention to their origin is important because the credibility of a source often determines the reliability of the information presented. The authority and credibility of information are established by the credentials of the author and the publication. Therefore, the quality of information may vary depending on the source's reliability. This is why learning to identify and verify sources is important for assessing the quality and rigor of information.

In journalism, **sources of information** are the origin of news. They include people, documents, publications, or institutions that provide data, testimonies, facts, or knowledge that journalists use to build information. Journalists must cite these sources accurately so that the audience can identify them and assess their credibility within the context of that information. Sources are essential for ensuring the truthfulness, accuracy, and depth of the information conveyed to the public. They also allow for corroborating, contextualizing, and expanding the coverage of events, helping journalists avoid speculation or inaccuracies.

One of the primary tasks of a journalist is to ensure that the information they publish is truthful. In this process, it's essential to know how to properly identify and use information sources. Source **verification** is the fundamental pillar upon which the credibility of any informative message is built, especially in journalism, where rigorous verification of data and sources guarantees its truthfulness. This is also an act of ethical responsibility and a defence against propaganda and manipulation. Without this necessary process, information becomes mere speculation.

The "who" & "what" pair

Among all the simple 5Ws that can be found in a text, the "who" & "what" pair corresponds to the sources. The relationship between these two simple Ws will determine the nature of the source. By focusing on this relationship, we can classify the source we are dealing with.



Typifying sources of information

We present a **classification** to help you identify and evaluate sources of information, considering not only their proximity to the facts (primary or secondary) but also their legitimacy (authorized or not), as well as their relevance and appropriateness in relation to the topic addressed by the information:

Classification of information sources	
• Lacks Sources:	Information presented without any reference or supporting evidence. <i>Example: A message that circulates with no indication of who said it or where it came from.</i>
• Unknown Sources:	Sources that are unidentified, either due to anonymity or lack of clear mention. <i>Example: "Statistics show that..." without specifying the source or offering additional proof</i>
• Personal / Documentary sources	Personal: Individuals providing information based on their direct experience, testimony, or knowledge. <i>Example: An interview with a technology expert.</i> Documentary: Documents or records containing formalized, archived information. <i>Example: An academic study or a statistical report.</i>
• Organizational / Non-organizational sources	Organizational: Sources originating from institutions or organized entities issuing information officially. <i>Example: A press release from a ministry or a company</i> Non-organizational (particular): Personal sources, meaning people offering their knowledge or personal experience. <i>Example: A business owner discussing the impact of a law on their company.</i>
• Primary / Secondary sources	Primary: Direct sources or eyewitnesses of events, or original documents that serve as a foundation. <i>Example: An eyewitness to an accident or an official government document.</i> Secondary: Sources that interpret, comment on, or summarize information from primary sources. <i>Example: An opinion article analyzing the results of scientific research.</i>
• Authorized / Unauthorized sources	Authorized: Sources with the expertise and legitimacy to speak on the topic due to their experience, knowledge, or position. <i>Example: An epidemiologist discussing a pandemic.</i> Unauthorized: Sources lacking sufficient training, experience, or authority on the topic they address. <i>Example: An influencer without medical knowledge talking about vaccine effects.</i>
• Relevant / Irrelevant sources	Relevant: Sources that provide key information directly related to the topic in question. <i>Example: An official economic report in a news piece about a financial crisis.</i> Irrelevant: Sources that do not provide directly connected or useful information on the topic discussed. <i>Example: A general comment on international politics in an article on the local economy.</i>

• Pertinent / Non-Pertinent sources

Pertinent: Sources that are appropriate and align with the context and focus of the news or topic discussed.

Example: A historian specializing in historical conflicts in a report on international diplomacy.

Non-Pertinent: Sources that may be vaguely connected to the topic but do not provide useful or suitable information for the context.

Example: A musician giving opinions on energy policies without direct connection to the topic at hand.

The impact of unknown sources

If we encounter unknown, nonexistent, or unclear sources, almost all the typologies from the previous section cannot be verified or precisely identified. Thus, even though we might assume a source is, for example, organizational and relevant because it refers to a document published by the UN regarding an armed conflict, if that document is not clearly identified, no matter how authorized, relevant, or pertinent it seems, it will not be. If this document is not accessible because it is not clearly identified, its relevance and pertinence will always be speculative, as they cannot be demonstrated.

EXERCISES

Selecting sources of information

On many occasions, we tend to search for the source of any kind of information based on excessively limited criteria. How many times do we end up asking the same person about something, out of laziness, because we trust them, or because we consider them to be intelligent, without them necessarily being an expert on the topic we're asking about?

There is nothing wrong with turning to a source to try to find the answer to a problem, or to get informed, but we must keep in mind that reality is much more complex and diverse. We must be aware that the appropriate sources for a piece of information may be others, and that, in many cases, there can be many different and varied sources.

Classifying information sources

As mentioned earlier, an unknown or imprecise source will prevent many of the classifications from being clearly identified. In any case, it is advisable to make an attempt to approach them (try to identify them), although it is very important not to take them for granted. For this reason, in the solved exercises, these classifications are marked in red.

On the other hand, it is important to emphasize that these "deficient" sources do not necessarily have to be false; they simply do not provide the necessary information for us to identify them. While we may speculate about their truthfulness, we must adopt a critical (skeptical, distrustful) attitude toward them.

Finally, it is also necessary to observe the sources within their context: a sentence in the text may not identify the source properly, but that same source may be clearly identified in another part of the same text.

Practical exercises


Exercise 1: Identifying different sources of information (1)

Identify three sources to obtain information on the following topics:

- Adolescence
- Effects of tobacco
- Anxiety

Debate and discuss briefly the sources selected and the reasons behind their selection. For example, the proximity of the student to the selected source, the formality of the source, the authority or expertise of the source, the possible selection of journalistic media or social networks... Additionally, observe and discuss which sources are most repeated among the selected ones.

Exercise 2.1: Classifying information sources (1)



INTERNACIONAL OPINIÓN ESPAÑA ECONOMÍA SOCIEDAD MEDIO AMBIENTE CIENCIA SALUD TECNOLOGÍA CULTURA DEPORTES GENTE BABELIA EL PAÍS SEMANAL **EL PAÍS EXPRES**

Presented a document for the treatment of smokers

Many still refer to smoking as a “habit.” This diminishes its true importance: it is a disease, and as such, it should be treated.

To address this, a document was presented this week with the aim of ensuring that anyone who wants to quit smoking receives healthcare support.

The idea is to identify the millions of smokers in Spain and offer them help to combat the leading cause of preventable premature death. Thousands of people die in Spain due to tobacco, and millions more around the world.

Classification table	
Source	Type
Presented a document	Unknown / Documentary / <i>Primary / Unauthorized / Irrelevant / Non pertinent</i>
Many still refer to smoking as a “habit”:	Unknown / Peronal / Non-organizational (particular) / <i>Unauthorized / Irrelevant / Non pertinent</i>
A document was presented	Unknown / Documentary / <i>Primary / Unauthorized / Irrelevant / Non pertinent</i>
...	<i>More elementary or basic Qs, if necessary</i>

Source: Qyourself

Exercise 2.2: Classifying information sources (2)



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EL PAÍS EXPRES

Healthcare experts present a document to ensure that smoking treatment is homogeneous and science-based

Many doctors still refer to smoking as a "habit." According to Rábade, this diminishes its true importance: "it is a disease, and it should be treated as such."

To address this, a group of experts—including family doctors, pulmonologists, and pharmacists—presented a document this week at a medical conference in Bilbao. The aim of the document is to ensure that anyone who wants to quit smoking receives healthcare support using the best tools proven to be scientifically effective.


The idea is that, through professionals at all levels of care—from pharmacies to hospitals—the approximately six million smokers in Spain—according to the latest European survey—can be identified and offered help to combat the leading cause of preventable premature death. Each year, 50,000 people die in Spain due to tobacco, and eight million worldwide, according to the WHO.

Classification table

Source	Type
Healthcare experts present a document	Unknown / Documentary / Non-organizational (particular) / Authorized / Relevant / Pertinent
Many doctors still refer to smoking as a "habit"	Unknown / Personal / Non-organizational (particular) / Authorized / Relevant / Pertinent
According to Rábade	Unknown / Personal / Non-organizational (particular) / Primary / Unauthorized / Irrelevant / Non pertinent
Group of experts: family doctors, pulmonologists, pharmacists	Unknown / Personal / Non-organizational (particular) / Primary / Authorized / Relevant / Pertinent
Document presented at a medical Conference	Unknown / Documentary / Organizational / Primary / Authorized / Relevant / Pertinent
European survey	Unknown / Documentary / Organizational / Primary / Unauthorized / Relevant / Pertinent






World Health Organization (WHO)	<i>Personal / Organizational / Primary / Authorized / Relevant / Pertinent</i>
...	More elementary or basic Qs, if necessary
	Source: Qyourself


Exercise 2.3: Classifying information sources (3)



INTERNACIONAL OPINIÓN ESPAÑA ECONOMÍA SOCIEDAD MEDIO AMBIENTE CIENCIA SALUD TECNOLOGÍA CULTURA DEPORTES GENTE BABELIA EL PAÍS SEMANAL **EL PAÍS EXPRES**

The Spanish Society of Primary Care Physicians presents an expert document to ensure that smoking treatment is homogeneous and science-based

Pablo Linde
 EL PAÍS | Bilbao - 05 OCT 2024 - 05:30 CEST     



A person smokes a cigarette in a park in Santiago de Compostela | **Óscar Corral**

Many doctors still refer to smoking as a “habit.” According to pulmonologist Carlos Rábade, this diminishes its true importance: “it is a disease, and as such, it should be treated.”

To address this, a group of experts—including family doctors, pulmonologists, and pharmacists—presented a document this week at the [National Congress of the Spanish Society of Primary Care Physicians \(Semergen\)](#) in Bilbao. This document aims to ensure that anyone who wants to quit smoking receives healthcare support using the best tools proven to be scientifically effective.

The idea is that through professionals at all levels of care—from pharmacies to hospitals—the approximately six million smokers in Spain—according to the latest [European Health Survey from 2020](#)—can be identified and offered help to combat the leading cause of preventable premature death. Each year, 50,000 people die in Spain due to tobacco, and eight million worldwide, [according to the WHO](#).

Classification table	
Source	Type
The Spanish Society of Primary Care Physicians presents an expert document:	<i>Documentary / Organizational / Primary / Authorized / Relevant / Pertinent</i>

Many doctors [...] refer to smoking as a "habit":	Unknown / Personal / Non-organizational (particular) / Primary / <i>Authorized / Relevant / Pertinent</i>
Carlos Rábade (pulmonologist)...	Personal / Non-organizational (particular) / Primary / Authorized / Relevant / Pertinent
Group of experts: family doctors, pulmonologists, pharmacists	Unknown / Personal / Non-organizational (particular) / Primary / <i>Authorized / Relevant / Pertinent</i>
Document (presented at the National Congress of the Spanish Society of Primary Care Physicians (SEMERGEN))	Documentary / Organizational / Primary / Authorized / Relevant / Pertinent
Latest European Health Survey from 2020	Documentary / Organizational / Primary / Authorized / Relevant / Pertinent
World Health Organization (WHO)	Documentary / Organizational / Primary / Authorized / Relevant / Pertinent
...	More elementary or basic Qs, if necessary
Source: El País, October 5, 2024 & Qyourself	

Exercise 4: Identifying different sources of information (2)

Identify three sources to obtain information on the following topics:

- Adolescence
- Effects of tobacco
- Anxiety

Evaluate the relevance of the information sources you selected in exercise 1 based on what you have learned so far.

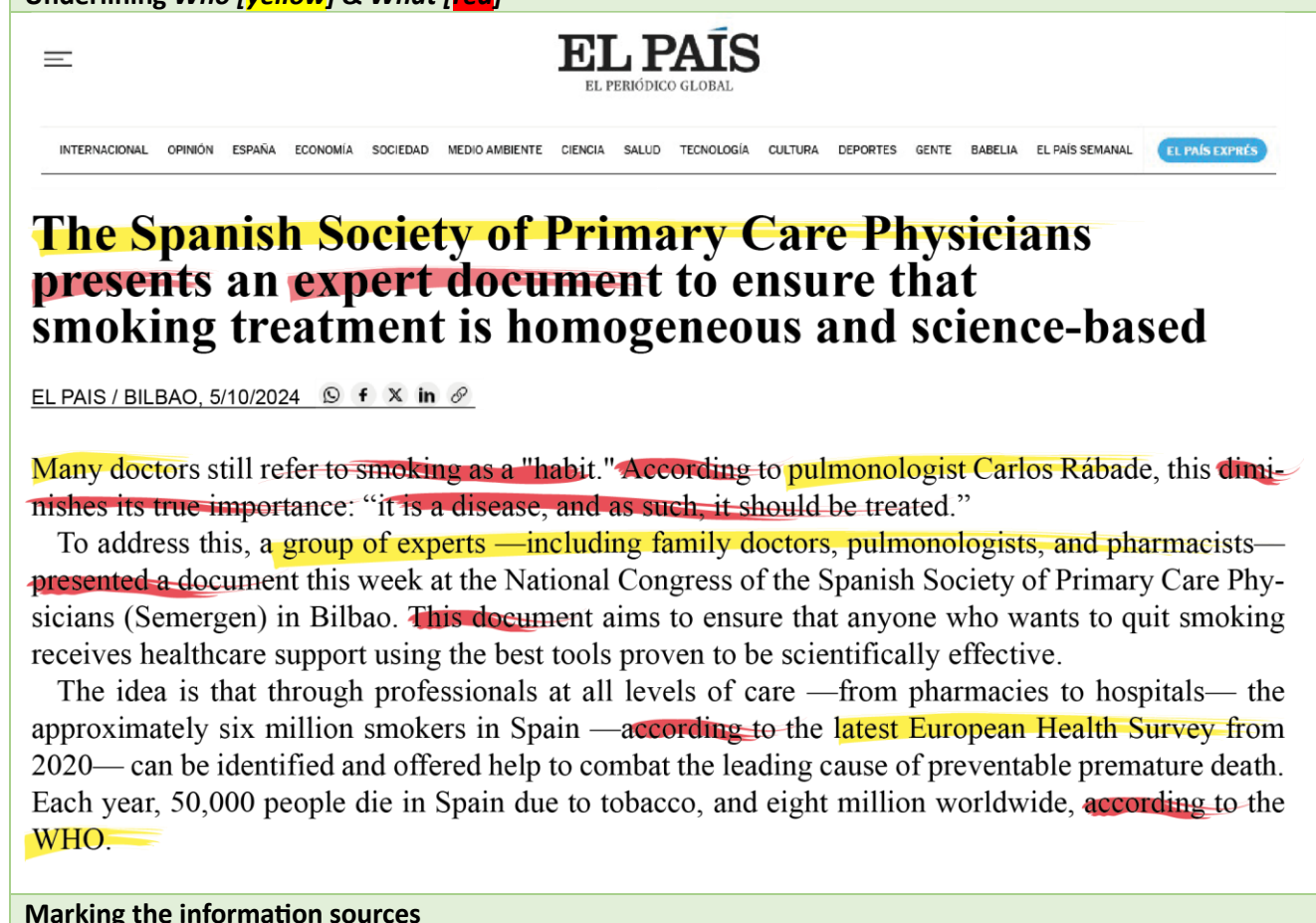
HITS & TIPS

How to do the exercises (suggestions)

The exercises can be completed using the tables (some examples have been included on these pages). They can also be done by hand, underlining and noting what is considered appropriate within the exercise texts. Below is an example of how the exercise could be done, underlining the *Who* & *What*- elementary Qs, and marking the information sources.

Example: Classifying information sources

Underlining *Who* [yellow] & *What* [red]



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The Spanish Society of Primary Care Physicians presents an expert document to ensure that smoking treatment is homogeneous and science-based


EL PAÍS / BILBAO, 5/10/2024

Many doctors still refer to smoking as a "habit." According to pulmonologist Carlos Rábade, this diminishes its true importance: "it is a disease, and as such, it should be treated."

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Marking the information sources



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Underlining Who & What, and marking the information sources



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World Health Organization (WHO)	Documentary / Organizational / Primary / Authorized / Relevant / Pertinent

Source: [El País, October 5, 2024](#) & Qyourself



Erasmus+: Key Action 2, Cooperation partnerships in adult education.

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