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Rethinking Authority and Bias

Modifying the CRAAP Test to Promote Critical Thinking about Marginalized Information

Many information evaluation methods include values like objectivity and authority that imply that only traditional scholarly sources are acceptable for inclusion in scholarly work. Although this is often a desirable outcome, it can bias research to exclude groups traditionally disenfranchised from scholarship, such as Indigenous, racialized, queer, and disabled communities.

The CRAAP test, originally created in 2004,[1] is a commonly taught method of source evaluation. The acronym, standing for Currency, Relevance, Authority, Accuracy, and Purpose, is intended to guide readers in thinking through different aspects of what makes a source trustworthy. Twenty years after its creation, increased efforts to include a diversity of perspectives have soured some of the CRAAP criteria. Its conception of authority and requirements that sources be unbiased, objective, and impartial risks excluding certain groups and people from scholarship. This article presents a few simple modifications to the CRAAP test that provide a means to evaluate marginalized information and prevent its exclusion.

Exclusionary Criteria

Some of the particularly egregious exclusionary criteria from the CRAAP test are the following:

- What are the author's credentials or organizational affiliations?
- Does the language or tone seem unbiased and free of emotion?
- Are there spelling, grammar, or typographical errors?
- Does the point of view appear objective and impartial?
- Are there political, ideological, cultural, religious, institutional, or personal biases?

This version of authority prioritizes credentials like degrees, official positions, and organizational affiliations. Historically and, to lesser extent, contemporarily, these types of status were impossible or much harder to obtain for all but privileged rich, white, heterosexual, abled, cis men. When looking for the voices of those not part of this privileged group, this style of authority would label most as "untrustworthy" for not being authoritative enough.

Similarly, objectivity, impartiality, and lack of bias are largely constructed concepts that serve to privilege a certain perspective as the default. All people and information have a perspective, and pretending that some things do not leads to only accepting things from a predominately white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, etc., perspective that has had the privilege to be considered "unbiased."

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The original CRAAP contributes to the continued disenfranchisement of marginalized communities from academia by labeling certain information untrustworthy and perpetuating these patterns of exclusion.

CRAAP Alternatives

Disillusioned with CRAAP but still wanting to teach evaluation, I was on the lookout for alternatives. One popular alternative is SIFT.[2] However, SIFT does not solve the problems of authority and what qualifies as accurate. "Finding better coverage" and "tracing claims"[3] may be impossible for marginalized groups because the knowledge does not exist in a format readily available for consumption by outsiders, either because of hegemonic structures of oppression and epistemicide or intentionally withheld due to principles of Indigenous data sovereignty. These issues are compounded by the word "better." Unqualified, "better" imports societal and personal biases about what a "good" source is, likely leading to things like colonial sources being rated more valuable. I also considered less popular evaluation methods. Some, such as CCOW,[4] made improvements but did not deconstruct authority sufficiently, and others, such as ACT UP,[5] doubled down on requirements that sources be unbiased.

Back to CRAAP

My unfruitful attempts to find a less marginalizing evaluation method came to a head in 2022, when I was invited to speak in the course "Indigenous People's Contemporary Issues." The course was new, for first or second year students, and intended to engage with "both Western science and Indigenous knowledge systems." The standard CRAAP test would go against the principles they were learning, such as listening to traditional Indigenous knowledge, and would disqualify the types of resources they needed. Without an alternative that sufficiently addressed constructed authority and objectivity, I decided to heavily modify CRAAP to remove or requalify the problematic aspects. Some criteria remain crossed out as a reminder to not judge sources on those criteria.

As a preface, I introduce bias by asking students to consider how their own might influence their assessments. This step is like the S from SIFT, which asks us to STOP before diving into evaluation.[6] This prepares students with the understanding that bias and positionality are unavoidable but should always be considered. I also emphasize that there are no right answers and that each item of CRAAP is a consideration rather than a requirement. The starting idea that the criteria are not absolute, but adaptable to the type of source, allows for more flexibility in integrating non-scholarly sources.

Currency remains largely the same as the original CRAAP, but with more explicit mention of the relativity of time for different topics. It asks students to critically consider whether older information might be acceptable in particular situations. Introducing the idea of the CRAAP criteria being relative to the situation is easier in this simple category and prepares students for thinking critically about why other criteria might also warrant an exception in certain circumstances.

Many alternatives to CRAAP remove **Relevance** because it is "not directly related to evaluating the source."[7] However, some students struggle to keep it in mind, or they noncritically use it as their *only* selection criteria. In either case, the R reminds students to consider Relevance and how it should be evaluated. As well, although Relevance does not say whether a source "is good" or not, I am trying to move away from *objective goodness* and more toward

what credentials, accuracy, etc., are needed in a particular instance. Relevance is relevant to remind us that what different criteria might be relevant in different situations.

Although **Authority** is the CRAAP item I felt needed the most change, I did not want to get rid of it entirely. If alternate forms of Authority are not talked about explicitly, source evaluators are likely to fall back on traditional conceptions of authority such as only trusting people with university credentials or other official positions. Keeping Authority as a criteria, with modifications, creates a site to consider alternate forms of authority and conforms to the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education where "unlikely voices can be authoritative, depending on need."[8] This version of Authority focuses less on abstract credentials and more on matching "qualifications" such as lived experiences to the need of a particular topic. I added a callout specifically addressing how the internet has allowed marginalized communities that are authorities on their own lives easier access to knowledge production.

I often use a trivial example to illustrate authority: If I cooked and ate alone last night, I am the ultimate authority on my meal. This example is overly simple, but it reinforces the idea of lived experience accounts having their own kind of authority that does not need external validation.

Accuracy is massively simplified, basically asking students to consider if the information is supported by evidence or other sources. Hopefully, with the addition of messaging about there being no right answers presented at the beginning of the exercise and present in other aspects, students will understand that these questions do not always need to be answered perfectly. Wording about the tone being "unbiased and free of emotion" is struck through as requiring information to be emotionless will disqualify many types of useful information such as accounts of lived experiences. Spelling and grammar also mostly only function to exclude people who speak or write in nonstandard ways, such as African American Vernacular English.

Purpose is unchanged other than crossing out the requirement for objectivity and impartiality and qualifying the question about biases. The original CRAAP test mentioned bias in both Accuracy and Purpose; I believe it should be retained in Purpose only, where it is less a question of if there is bias (as there always is) and more about identifying what that bias is. From there, we can consider how the bias of a particular source might interact positively or negatively with the specific research topic. My favorite example is a study funded and published in 2021 by employees of the airplane company Boeing, stating that there is low risk of COVID-19 transmission on airplanes.[9] Although published in a peer-reviewed journal, the bias of wanting people to continue using their product makes their purpose suspect. This example demonstrates that even traditionally "trusted" sources like peer-reviewed journals and large companies are not inherently better than the less established sources that marginalized groups might use to spread information. Bias can exist equally in both cases, and an examination of how it interacts with the topic and Purpose of the source is always required.

This pared down version of the CRAAP test hopefully allows for a greater diversity of voices and sources while still providing enough guidance to make good critical choices.

Reactions and Reflections

This new version of CRAAP promotes deeper critical thinking about what information should be considered contextually trustworthy as it emphasizes nuance and thinking holistically about the context in which the information was generated and how it will be used

in research. After presenting it in an Indigenous art history class, students prompted discussions about "Pretendians" (people who claim to be Indigenous but are not recognized as such by Indigenous communities), positionality statements,[10] and what to do when you need a certain number of scholarly sources but have an Indigenous non-scholarly source. Before guiding them through my CRAAP test, this same group stated that they mostly picked sources based on relevance or peer review.

In addition to the necessary modifications to prevent it from automatically disqualifying relevant sources, the modified CRAAP test seems to prevent students from using the CRAAP test as a checklist where every criterion must be met. By resisting easy answers—students have to identify both if a criteria needs to be met and then whether it is—the modified CRAAP test promotes deeper critical thinking.

In the spirit of not producing static checklists, I do not want to consider this version of the CRAAP test as "done." I modified it to suit the needs I saw in students over the course of several years as I found different knowledge gaps that needed to be addressed. Discussion with colleagues at a recent conference presentation[11] provided new avenues for continued development, such as integrating elements of BEAM[12] to consider how sources will be used. It has changed slowly over time and will no doubt continue to do so in the future. Being adaptable is the only way to avoid reproducing the knowledge gatekeeping of the past. ✄

Notes

1. Sarah Blakeslee, "The CRAAP Test," *LOEX Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2004), https://commons.emich.edu/loexquarterly/vol31/iss3/4.

2. Mike Caulfield, "SIFT (the Four Moves)," https://hapgood.us/2019/06/19/sift-the-four-moves/.

3. Caulfield, "SIFT (the Four Moves)."

4. Anthony Bernard Tardiff, "Have a CCOW: A CRAAP Alternative for the Internet Age," *Journal of Information Literacy* 16, no. 1 (2022), https://doi.org/10.11645/16.1.3092.

5. Dawn Stahura, "ACT UP for Evaluating Sources: Pushing against Privilege," *College & Research Libraries News* 79, no. 10 (2018), https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.79.10.551.

6. Caulfield, "SIFT (the Four Moves)".

7. Tardiff, "Have a CCOW: A CRAAP Alternative for the Internet Age," 124.

8. American Library Association, "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," January 11, 2016, https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.

9. Jenna K. Pang, Stephen P. Jones, Lindsay L. Waite, Nels A. Olson, Jason W. Armstrong, Robert J. Atmur, Joshua J. Cummins, "Probability and Estimated Risk of Sars-Cov-2 Transmission in the Air Travel System," *Travel Medicine and Infectious Disease* 43 (2021), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmaid.2021.102133. This and similar research were previously linked on Boeing's "Is It Safe to Fly?" webpage, which has since been taken down, though an archived version can be viewed here: https://web.archive.org/web/20201217102218/http://www.boeing.com/confident-travel/index.html

10. Positionality statements are a great place to learn about what kind of alternate authority an author might have, but some of the harsher evaluation methods could disqualify a source simply for having one and therefore admitting to having a position (i.e., not being impartial) at all.

11. Emily Jaeger-McEnroe, "Rethinking Authority: Modifying the CRAAP Test to Promote Critical Thinking About Marginalized Information," in *Workshop for Instruction in Library Use* (Richmond, BC, Canada, 2024), https://doi.org/10.17605/osf.io/hc6vu.

12. Joseph Bizup, "BEAM: A Rhetorical Vocabulary for Teaching Research-Based Writing," *Rhetoric Review* 27, no. 1 (2008), https://doi.org/10.1080/07350190701738858.

Appendix: Modified CRAAP Test

Stop! Check Your Biases!

Our own beliefs can make it difficult to judge the credibility of a resource, especially if it concerns a sensitive subject. Be aware of your potential biases when reading information that contradicts or challenges your personal beliefs.

Conversely, read items that support your belief with an equally critical eye. It's easier to miss or ignore problems when something confirms your bias.

(Modified) CRAAP Test for Evaluating Information
- Guidelines for thinking critically about information and sources
- Types of questions you should **consider** before trusting a source
- There are **no right answers** to every question. There can be reasons to use a source even if it doesn't score well on some of the questions

Currency: The timeliness of the information
- Is this the most up-to-date information available for this topic?
- Has the information been revised or updated?
- Does your topic require current information, or will older sources work?
  - Some information ages faster than others
  - Different timelines for different disciplines and topics

Relevance: The importance of the information for your needs
- Does the information relate to your topic or help answer your research question?
- Have you considered other resources before choosing this one?
- Is this the best resource or is it just good enough?

Authority: The source of the information
- Who is the author/publisher/source/sponsor?
- What are the author's credentials?
  - This does not mean you should only trust people with PhDs!
- Is the author qualified to write about this topic?
  - Someone without formal credentials can still be an authority—**it's more about matching their "qualifications" to the topic!**

People traditionally disenfranchised by academia and/or mainstream popular resources are more likely to use things like social media or websites to spread information. Information from these sources CAN BE good even if low in official Authority—just make sure it does well in other categories of CRAAP, and think about how Indigenous people are "Authorities" about Indigenous topics!

Accuracy: The reliability, truthfulness and correctness
- Is the information supported by evidence?
  - Are any sources given? Most popular resources, especially news stories, don't have reference lists, but some may link to other articles or name their sources.
- Are there other sources (that also pass the CRAAP test) that confirm the information?
- ~~Does the language or tone seem unbiased and free of emotion?~~

Purpose: The reason the information exists
- What is the purpose of the information? Is it to inform, teach, sell, entertain or persuade?
- Do the authors/sponsors make their intentions or purpose clear?
- Is the information fact, opinion or propaganda?
- ~~Does the point of view appear objective and impartial?~~
- Are there political, ideological, cultural, religious, institutional or personal biases?
  - There's no such thing as something completely unbiased – but think about what the bias is and how it could affect the information