CHAPTER 9.

TRADITIONAL INFORMATION LITERACY INSTRUCTION PREPARES STUDENTS TO EVALUATE AI TEXTS

✨ *EXPERT READERS USE LATERAL READING TO EVALUATE THE CREDIBILITY OF TEXTS*

Angela Laflen
California State University, Sacramento

Most college students share the experience of writing a research paper with what can be described as "strict source requirements." These requirements are often detailed in a section on the assignment sheet that looks more or less like this one (which I adapted from real models posted online):

- Four scholarly sources required. Two of these sources should come from library databases. The other 2 sources are your choice—as long as they are scholarly in nature.
- Be sure to cite your sources correctly in MLA format.
- No *Wikipedia* allowed.

Strict source requirements like this are intended both to help students learn to identify and use scholarly sources and to make it easier to teach the use of sources. As instructors are aware, sources that aren't scholarly can get very messy, very quickly when trying to craft an academic argument built on sound evidence. This is especially true for many sources circulating online, some of which even include entirely fabricated information. Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) chatbots like ChatGPT, Gemini, and Claude, for example, not only commonly produce fabricated citations that look convincingly like real citations but also obscure the process they use to generate information (Weise & Metz, 2023). That is one reason why, due to the widespread availability of GenAI today, the source requirements sections of research

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paper assignment sheets are also increasingly likely to add a final restriction, advising students:

- You may not use AI to complete any part of this assignment.

GenAI has widened the gulf between the critical thinking and information literacy skills taught in college writing courses and the skills students need to use in daily life and after graduation. On one side of this gulf are traditional approaches to critical thinking and information literacy instruction that prepare students to complete school assignments by closely reading and using scholarly sources. On the other side is an information environment that has been radically transformed by changes to the technical infrastructure that we use to acquire information. Recent studies have found that instruction in critical thinking and information literacy remains "strangely removed" from the changes that have reshaped information practices across society (Head et al., 2020, p. 11). As Lisa Bell and Joni K. Hayward-Marcum (2026) explain, even students who appear digitally fluent need explicit guidance since "the use of AI is not a natural skill set—like all digital skills, it is a learned literacy." Without structured opportunities to develop critical AI literacy, students are left increasingly unprepared to navigate this changed information environment or evaluate information sources that are not scholarly.

To narrow the gap between the skills taught in college and those needed in daily life, instruction should include opportunities for students to practice using *lateral reading* strategies to evaluate sources. *Lateral reading* is a technique used by expert fact-checkers in which readers open new browser tabs and consult other sources across the internet to investigate who created a text, what others say about them, and whether the information is supported elsewhere. Rather than relying only on the content within a single source, lateral reading helps students build a fuller understanding of a text's *rhetorical context*, including its purpose, credibility, and accuracy. It is a valuable skill that can help students evaluate any source of information, including AI-generated content.

CLOISTERING SCHOLARLY SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The traditional approach to teaching critical information practices focuses on equipping students with skills to identify scholarly sources and discouraging the use of other types of sources. At the center of this approach is vertical reading—evaluating a source by examining its internal features, such as the author's name, the presence of citations, and the stated purpose or argument. As Sarah Ann Singer (2019) explains, the goal is "to compare unknown sources to traditional scholarly sources, in which features such as authorship and citation information

are always clearly evident" (p. 156). When a source lacks these features, students are often told it is a "bad" source and should be avoided (Singer, 2019, p. 157). This contrasts with lateral reading, which involves leaving the source to consult other materials online to verify its credibility. While vertical reading focuses on surface signals within a text, lateral reading encourages students to examine a source's context.

The primary problem with the traditional approach is that students cannot rely only on scholarly sources to answer all the questions they face, and most of the information they encounter in daily life and after graduation is not scholarly in nature. For instance, a student deciding whether to use a free GenAI résumé builder would likely find little to no coverage of that emerging topic in academic scholarship. Additionally, this approach overlooks the extent to which any source, including a scholarly source, can only be considered good or bad within a specific context. Doubling down on the traditional approach in the face of continuing changes to the technical information infrastructure leaves students unprepared to evaluate the credibility of information sources that are not scholarly, makes them vulnerable to deception by sources that mimic the features of traditional scholarly sources, and does not prepare them to think about sources rhetorically.

Vertical Reading in Practice

For example, consider the impossibility of using vertical reading strategies to evaluate the credibility of the following information, which was produced by Google's Gemini chatbot during a chat that began when I prompted Gemini to: "Write a paper in APA using real sources arguing that stairs should be eliminated because their risks to human safety outweigh their benefits. Include a references list." Gemini generated the following output:

> **The Case Against Stairs: A Risky Proposition**
>
> While stairs have long been a common feature in buildings, their inherent dangers pose a significant threat to human safety, outweighing any potential benefits.
>
> **The Perils of Stairwells**
>
> Numerous studies have highlighted the risks associated with stairs. A significant portion of accidental injuries, particularly among the elderly, are attributed to falls on stairs. These falls can result in severe injuries, including fractures, head trauma, and even fatalities. Additionally, poorly designed or maintained stairwells can present hazards such as uneven steps,

slippery surfaces, or inadequate lighting, further increasing the risk of accidents.

A Barrier to Accessibility

Stairs also pose significant accessibility challenges for individuals with disabilities. For those who rely on wheelchairs or other mobility aids, stairs can be insurmountable obstacles, limiting their ability to move freely and independently. This can lead to social isolation and a reduced quality of life.

The Case for a Stair-Free Future

To mitigate these risks, a radical rethinking of building design is necessary. By eliminating stairs entirely, we can create safer and more inclusive environments. Elevators and ramps can provide accessible and safer alternatives for vertical transportation. Additionally, single-story buildings can eliminate the need for stairs altogether.

While some may argue that stairs provide a form of exercise, there are numerous other ways to incorporate physical activity into daily life without the associated risks. Activities such as walking, cycling, and swimming offer safer and more effective ways to improve cardiovascular health and overall well-being.

In conclusion, the dangers posed by stairs far outweigh their benefits. By prioritizing safety, accessibility, and inclusivity, we can create a future where stairs are a thing of the past.

References

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2023). *Preventing Falls*.

National Safety Council. (2023). *Safety at Home: Falls*.

World Health Organization. (2021). *World Report on Disability*. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/world-report-on-disability

This text bears many of the markers associated with credibility. It is clearly organized and includes an arguable thesis statement at the beginning. Information is attributed to sources through in-text citations that are recognizably formatted in APA style and refer to well-known government and nonprofit organizations relevant to the study of human safety. There is nothing in the text itself, other than the truncated citations in the references list, to indicate that this information might be suspect.

Of course, those who know about the tendency of chatbots to invent sources might be suspicious. And their suspicions would be confirmed if they took the time to double-check Gemini's response, since only one of the sources listed, the World Health Organization's (WHO) *World Report on Disability*, exists as written. Although the National Safety Council and Centers for Disease Control are real organizations that have pages on their websites with names similar to what Gemini produced, the articles Gemini cited are "hallucinations," the term used to refer to information fabricated by a GenAI model with no basis in facts or reality (Weise & Metz, 2023).

Moreover, not even the real source by the WHO advocates for eliminating stairs or suggests that ramps and elevators are a viable alternative method of vertical transportation. In other words, in addition to "hallucinating" two sources, Gemini's output is also not based on the real source it cited. Even if hallucination becomes less common, the problem of chatbots misinterpreting sources or creating output that is not based on sources cited will still exist.

This example helps to illustrate why using vertical reading to evaluate the credibility of AI-generated information will never be sufficient. No amount of close reading will help a reader establish whether the cited sources actually exist or if the chatbot has accurately interpreted information presented in real sources cited. As Leslie Allison et al. (2026) contend, GenAI lacks transparency, not only because chatbots are "designed to sound credible and authoritative even when the information they provide is inaccurate," but also because GenAI's opaque search processes obscure original sources, making it difficult for users to trace information back to its origins or assess its credibility in context. Their analysis reinforces the limits of surface-level evaluation and the need to teach students rhetorical strategies for questioning where information comes from and how it was constructed.

GENERATIVE IDEA: LATERAL READING STRATEGIES

If traditional approaches are insufficient, how can we better prepare students to evaluate AI-generated information? In rhetoric and composition scholarship, the strategy of lateral reading, or looking outside the text itself for information to establish its credibility, has been identified as a particularly valuable way to evaluate the credibility of unfamiliar sources (Overstreet, 2021; Singer, 2019). Lateral reading involves skimming a wide range of sources outside of the text to build up an understanding of the text's rhetorical context, including who created the text, what their purpose was, what genre the text is, what information sources the writer used, whether sources cited in the text actually exist and are accurately represented, and more, to determine the extent to which the information provided is reliable. It draws on the networked capabilities of the Internet

as readers open browser windows and search for information about the source and the website on which it is posted.

Lateral reading has long been used by expert readers and professional fact-checkers to evaluate the credibility of unfamiliar, often digital sources of information (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019). One challenge students face in learning this strategy is knowing where to look for relevant context. To evaluate a source laterally, students often need to piece together the *rhetorical situation* by identifying who created the text, what their purpose is, who the intended audience might be, and what platform or context the text comes from. This process can be time-consuming, especially when the information isn't readily available or when the text lacks clear authorship. Still, developing the habit of lateral reading equips students with the critical tools needed to assess credibility in an evolving information landscape.

Lateral Reading in Practice

As an example of what lateral reading looks like in practice, I asked students in a recent technical writing course to use lateral reading to evaluate definitions produced by ChatGPT. The students were conducting early research on e-waste, and each student was assigned to contribute the definition of a specific e-waste term, such as "destruction" or "toxins," to a classroom glossary. To get started on the assignment, each student prompted ChatGPT to generate a definition of the term they were researching, and then they used lateral reading to evaluate whether the definition ChatGPT provided was a credible source for information in the context of their own assignment. They began their lateral reading by identifying the version of ChatGPT they had used and by consulting internet sources to learn what training data had been included in that version and when it was last updated. They then identified three to five other online definitions and explanations of their term, which they did by conducting an online search of their term and skimming sources quickly to identify other potentially useful sources. Next, they compared ChatGPT's definition to those sources. For this assignment, the students did not ask ChatGPT to provide a list of sources, so they did not have to check whether ChatGPT cited real or fabricated sources.

While most of the students found that ChatGPT generated an accurate definition of their term and did not fabricate any information, a few students did discover inaccuracies in the information provided by ChatGPT through their lateral reading. For example, when one student prompted ChatGPT to draft a definition of "end of use" (EOU) in the context of e-waste, she received a definition that better suited the similar term "end of life" (EOL). The student who

made this discovery wasn't familiar with either term when she began the assignment and therefore didn't initially notice the inaccuracy. She was able to identify the issue with ChatGPT's definition when she cross-checked information in different sources. She observed:

> Because ChatGPT's definition fails to differentiate between two very similar terms and consists of overlaps, I believe it misses the mark for defining this term. While some pieces of the ChatGPT definition are accurate about End of Use (EOU), such as EOU being able to occur when consumers opt for newer, more efficient devices that better suit their requirements, ChatGPT fails to distinguish EOU from EOL causing the extended definition to be somewhat confusing and inaccurate.

In this case, lateral reading helped the student to evaluate the accuracy of AI-generated information even on an unfamiliar topic.

CONCLUSION

Traditional approaches to critical thinking and information literacy instruction do not adequately prepare students to evaluate AI-generated information or many of the other sources they encounter in daily life. Although it might be tempting to respond to the challenges of evaluating AI-generated information by simply banning the use of GenAI in academic contexts, doing so will only widen the gap between information literacy and critical thinking instruction in higher education and the skills that students need to use information in other contexts. To help narrow this gap, critical thinking and information literacy instruction should include opportunities for students to practice constructing the rhetorical contexts of a wide range of information sources, including non-scholarly sources that students have often been discouraged from using. Although this effort at lateral reading is certainly messier and more time-consuming than simply avoiding the use of any sources that aren't scholarly, it equips students with skills they can apply to evaluate any information they encounter.

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