SCIENTIFIC SOURCE EVALUATION: SHORT WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT

SARAH WOOLLEY, Associate Professor and
TAMARA WESTERN, Associate Professor
Department of Biology
Faculty of Science

COURSE:
ESSENTIAL BIOLOGY
(BIOL 115)

SUMMARY

Students choose recent, biology-related news articles. In 200 words, they evaluate the reliability of the media source and content.

"The aim is not memorization but to build interest in biology."
- Sarah Woolley

GOALS

- Evaluate the trustworthiness of scientific sources
- Practice concise writing
- Stimulate interest in biology

McGill | Teaching and Learning Services

STEPS

1. Students each find a biology-related article in a newspaper or on social media for which they will evaluate the trustworthiness of the source.
2. Students post their choices to a myCourses discussion forum to ensure that each student works with a different article.
3. The instructor provides students with guiding questions they should address in their evaluation.
4. Students submit a summary of their respective article, along with an evaluation of the source material.

ASSESSMENT

The assignment is worth 5% of students' final grade.

Marks are awarded according to two criteria:

1. Ability to apply course concepts to an argument
2. Ability to follow assignment instructions

Two TAs grade the assignment using a rubric.

READY TO TRY IT OUT?

HERE'S SOME ADVICE ...
This assignment is easy to implement if you:

- Gain student buy-in by being explicit about the goal and value of the assignment.
- Focus on the main learning outcome, i.e., the ability to verify the trustworthiness of information.
- Keep assessment simple.

BENEFITS

- In a course that largely has exams with multiple choice questions, this assignment allows students a different approach to demonstrating their learning.
- Students develop critical thinking skills.
- Students' writing tends to be more focused because they've chosen problems that they're interested in.
- Students from all faculties take this course. This assignment can level the playing field for students with different backgrounds in science.

CHALLENGES

Some students need to be persuaded that the assignment has value for their learning.

Please cite as follows: Teaching and Learning Services. (2020). *Beyond Grading: Assessment Strategies from McGill Instructors – S. Woolley and T. Western.* Montreal, Canada: Teaching and Learning Services, McGill University.