“Who Said That?”

Guidelines for Evaluating Sources

Al Tompkins-Bob Steele/The Poynter Institute

How does this source know what he/she knows? Can I prove the sources’ information through government records or other documents? How can I confirm this information through further reporting or other sources?

Are there underlying assumptions that my source depends on which I should question?

How representative is my source’s point of view? Who else knows what my source knows?

What is the past reliability and reputation of this source?

What is the source’s motive for providing the information? What does this source have to gain or lose? Will this information make the source look better, worse, guilty or innocent?

What is my relationship with the source?

Why am I using this source? Did I use this source because I am in a rush and this source often gives good quotes and soundbites on deadline? How often do others or I use this source?

Do I fear losing this source? How does that perception color my judgment? How am I being manipulated by this source?

Where can I find an independent person who has the expertise on the subject of this story and can help me verify/interpret/challenge the information my source has given me?



The Poynter Institute • *A School for Journalists*

801 Third Street South • St. Petersburg, Florida 33701 • Phone: (727) 821-9494 • Fax: (727) 821-0583

www.poynter.org • info@poynter.org

Confidential Sources: Who? When? Why?

**Bob Steele-Al Tompkins/The Poynter Institute**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

***Fulfill all of the following four criteria, then consider the other questions listed below.***

1. A story that uses confidential sources should be of overwhelming public concern.
2. Before using an unnamed source, you must be convinced there is no other way to get the essential information on the record.
3. The unnamed source must have verifiable and first-hand knowledge of the story. Even if the source cannot be named, the information must be proven true. If you are unsure the information is true, admit it to the public.
4. You should be willing to reveal to the public why the source cannot be named and what, if any promises the news organization made in order to get the information.

What does the use of a confidential source mean to the factual accuracy and contextual authenticity of your story?

Does this source deserve the protection of his/her identity?

What legal obligations do you incur by promising not to reveal this source’s name? If you are sued, are you willing to go to jail to protect this source? If you are sued, will the source come forward and be named? Is the reluctance justifiable?

How would readers/viewers/listeners evaluate the same information if they knew the source’s name and motivations?

What have you done to help the source understand the risks he/she is taking by giving you information?

If you promised to protect a source’s identity are you using production techniques that will insure the protection you promised? What if a lawyer subpoenas the raw tapes? Would the person be identifiable in the tape outtakes?

You should understand your newsroom’s policy on confidentiality before you promise it to sources. You may need the consent of an editor and/or you may have to, by policy, reveal a source’s identity to a supervisor. Your source should be told you might have to identity them to others in your newsroom.



The Poynter Institute • *A School for Journalists*

801 Third Street South • St. Petersburg, Florida 33701 • Phone: (727) 821-9494 • Fax: (727) 821-0583

www.poynter.org • info@poynter.org