

# Evaluation Essentials: From A to Z (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)

Alkin, M., & Vo, A. (2018). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

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## Introduction

Everything you need to know about the planning and conducting of an evaluation is included in the second edition of *Evaluations Essentials: From A to Z* (2018) by renowned scholar Marvin C. Alkin and his co-author Anne T. Vo. The text is a novice's guide to the somewhat complex and intimidating world of evaluation methods, practices, and procedures. While astute students have become familiar with the common verbiage, constructs, purposes, and publications of formal scholarly research in their chosen field, this exploration of the discipline of evaluation is part review and part new information.

## About the Authors

Marv Alkin co-authored this second edition of *Evaluation Essentials* with former student Anne Vo. Alkin is the lead voice in the text and speaks from a wealth of knowledge after fifty years as a professor at UCLA and as founder of the Center for the Study of Evaluation (Alkin & Vo, 2018). Anne Vo is a professor at the University of Southern California who teaches courses on evaluation and conducts evaluations for a wide range of clients and organizations (Alkin & Vo, 2018). Since Alkin and Vo are practitioners as well as scholars they are able to write from both unique perspectives which adds depth to the text.

## Summary of Arguments

Attempting to cover everything from "A to Z" on any topic in just 300 pages can be daunting but Alkin and Vo make it accessible. For the most part, they adequately address the critical components of the evaluative process all while interweaving a few central themes such as the importance of understanding context, fostering stakeholder relationships, and a focus on use. These themes are seen throughout book and become ingrained in the alert reader.

The authors make a concerted effort to explain how important context knowledge is to high-quality evaluation. Effective evaluators must dive into their client organization to learn about the industry as a whole, the specific culture, the political climate, etc. The text asks evaluators to fully invest in the client by using what Alkin and Vo (2018) have termed "context-sensitive evaluation" (p. 38). One way evaluators learn about context is through the building of a logic model for a program with the assistance of stakeholders. Evaluators who are intentional about learning the context by developing relationships create buy-in with key constituents before, during, and after the evaluation.

Alkin and Vo have a heavy focus on stakeholders and highlight the vital role they play in evaluations. They advise finding and cultivating relationships with stakeholders early and engaging them throughout the process. The primary stakeholders (those in formal leadership roles, supervisors tied closely to the program, or the central funders) generally have the loudest voices

but secondary stakeholders should not be excluded. In fact, the authors encourage the development of and attention to this population by evaluation professionals. Most importantly, the book notes that developing these relationships with stakeholders often leads to greater buy-in and use upon completion which is the goal of any evaluation.

The third key argument regards the actual use of the evaluation. The authors are use advocates and it is apparent in each chapter. Section V dives into the definitions of use including instrumental, conceptual, process, and misuse. Alkin and Vo recount how proper preparation to understand context, coupled with fostering stakeholder relationships, leads towards increased use. As opposed to typical academic research which merely “seeks conclusions,” evaluation “leads to decisions” (Alkin & Vo, 2018, p. 9). Evaluation findings should lead to action; does a program need to be eliminated or altered? Has it shown to be effective?

## Summary of Contents

To reiterate, the authors cover the entire evaluation process and therefore focus on breadth over depth. In addition to the key strengths mentioned previously, additional topics included are evaluation contracts, determining evaluative questions, and cost analysis. The evaluative process employs much of the same methods as traditional research. Consequently, the areas of quantitative and qualitative methods, obtaining and analyzing data, and sampling are also covered.

## Strengths

Alkin and Vo have done an admirable job of writing a text which can appeal to various audiences and has several evident strengths. First, the book is unpretentious and straightforward. Although the book is co-authored the voice seems to be that of Alkin who speaks to the reader in an approachable tone. This method de-mystifies discipline and sets the student at ease, resulting in a work that feels less like a textbook than one would expect.

Next, the authors strategically employ a “further readings” section at the conclusion of each chapter. Here they include multiple books and articles by evaluation experts which allows the reader to decide which areas they would like to investigate further and keeps the book moving through the topics. One such suggested resource is Davidson’s (2015) article in section N which implores evaluators to ask tough evaluative

questions to produce high quality usable findings. This resource pushes the novice evaluator to critically consider what types of questions to ask and consider the effect of a particular method on the evaluation and eventual findings. While *Evaluation Essentials* is accessible to the masses, these additional resources tend to be more scholarly and stretch the reader.

Finally, the figures included in the text are effective in displaying complex ideas in an alternative fashion for visual learners and help to conceptualize large concepts on a single page. One such example is on page 201 in Figure Q.1, the “Overview chart: Evaluation fundamentals,” which shows a step-by-step listing of evaluation activities, when they are to be completed in the process and where to find help by section in the text. The next figure (Q.2) on page 206 is the “Evaluation management time line” which is an easy-to-follow visual of the entire evaluation process. It also notes where each specific topic can be found in the text for quick reference. Furthermore, these graphics are not simply dropped into the text but include helpful embedded explanations in the chapter.

## Weaknesses

Most novice evaluation students would agree this is a quality text but it is not without weaknesses. First, possibly as a by-product of its simplicity, it is incredibly repetitive. At the end of the book it seems the authors were stretching to include additional topics, some of which seemed to be a rehashing of previous subjects. The subtitle of “A to Z” might have driven the need for extending the book past its natural ending.

Conversely, some topics were covered a bit too quickly and needed further attention or may have been best left out of the text entirely. A prime example is the “How are Costs Analyzed” portion in section X which begins with the authors’ stating that “cost analyses are only rarely included in evaluations” (p. 284) but then continues on for several pages slogging through examples and mathematical formulas. Again, a majority of the book is simple and straightforward in presenting the ins and outs of evaluation. When this section arrives and the authors attempt to tackle a substantial topic in a mere eleven pages, they are unable to do so and finally direct readers to additional resources because “full understanding of the cost issue requires greater detail than I am able to provide here” (p. 294). Yet, this topic is of vital importance to developing evaluators and is stressed by Program Evaluation Standards (Yarbrough,

Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2010). As Levin and Belfield (2015) note there is a growing need for cost analysis as most evaluations do not address costs or measure their effectiveness.

Finally, the authors introduce details of a fictional program called RUPAS piecemeal throughout the book. Ideally, the reader will connect what is presented in each chapter to the case study as a learning mechanism. While some may consider this an added feature, the details of the program are somewhat difficult to keep up with over the course of a traditional semester and could be considered superfluous for some readers. To make better use of RUPAS, an instructor should make time each week to drive home the applications. Another option could be for the RUPAS case to be included in its entirety in one section and not in the current disjointed snippets. This would allow the reader to obtain the full picture of the program and then be able to refer back to it while working through the book.

## Conclusion

Alkin and Vo have written a comprehensive book (all the way from A to Z) on the discipline of evaluation which satisfactorily meets the needs of the novice. Overall, the book was well written and approachable in describing what can be a dense topic. Though some limitations exist which may have resulted from their aim to be brief and all-encompassing, it is an effective text for those desiring to learn the basics of evaluation.

## References

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