

Evaluating Internet Sources

Library Media Center

The Internet has a lot to offer, but not all sites are equally reliable or helpful. Establishing and learning standards to evaluate and filter information one finds on the Internet is a good beginning in becoming a critical consumer of all types of information.

Below are a few guidelines for evaluating resources on the Internet.

The questions below seek the **who**, **what**, **where** and **why** of a web site: **What** does this site say? **Who** says it? **Why** is this information being stated? **Where** did the site get the information? **Why** should we accept it as true? **Who** else corroborates the information?

Pre-evaluation:

As you begin the research process, think about what you are investigating. Your evaluation of each source will depend on your needs.

Ask yourself these questions:

What kinds of information do I need for my purpose?

Is your search to get ideas, find factual or statistical information, substantiate or challenge a viewpoint, because your professor requires an Internet source in your bibliography, or something else?

Is it important that my information be current?

Are there reasons why the Internet is needed with its high tech or real-time information? Obviously, print sources such as magazines or journals are technically *dated* as the event didn't occur yesterday! If your research involves historical facts or statistics maybe a print source would be more reliable or easier to find.

Do you need lengthy research reports or a one-paragraph news update?

How might the information differ from print sources? Would a print source provide more extensive information for your needs?

Content: (Scope, Accuracy, Relevance)

What is the purpose or motive of the site?

Some sites state their purpose but you often have to look for subtleties when the site is persuasive or selling you something.

What is the point of view: Is the covered information fact, opinion, or propaganda?

It is not always easy to separate fact from opinion. Facts can usually be verified; opinions, though they may be based on factual information, evolve from the interpretation of facts. Skilled writers can make you think their interpretations are facts.

Is there advertising on the site?

Be aware of sites where the advertising may influence the information. How might this manipulate the information found on the site?

Are there grammatical, typographical, or spelling errors?

These kinds of errors not only indicate a lack of quality control but can actually produce inaccuracies in information.

Are the links to outside resources pertinent? Do other reliable sites link to this one?

You can find out who links to a site by going to Google's 'Advanced Search' and searching for links under the 'Page-Specific Search'.

Red Flag! (look out when a site:)

Tries to pull the reader in emotionally – uses anger or empathy.

Shows those with opposing views as irrational antagonists.

Looks showy but it offers little substance.

Who is the audience or target?

Scholars, professionals, general public, or consumer?

What kind of page is it?

URL domains can give you a major hint: commercial -.com, educational -.edu, military -.mil, governmental -.gov, organizations -.org, networks and service providers -.net (also note country codes used in URLs).

Remember - don't always assume a university affiliation guarantees credibility. A tilde <~> usually indicates that the work is automatically posted and is not reviewed.

Keep in mind that since 1996, .com, .org and .net could be registered by non-commercial and commercial groups. Additional new domains -.info, -.biz, -.name, -.coop, -.aero, -.museum –are now on the web.

Credibility: (Source/Authorship or Trustworthiness/Bias)

Is there a clear statement of responsibility?

Determine who or what body is ultimately accountable for the information.

Does the author have appropriate credentials?

If the author is associated with a college or university, check the department site to see if the author is listed.

Try doing a general search through a search engine to see if the author is authoring other materials and/or is mentioned as a scholar in an outside narrative.

Is the author affiliated with an educational institution, government agency, or research facility?

If so, is there some indication that there are publication standards?

Can you contact the author?

That is, is there a phone number or postal address to contact for more information? Simply an email address is not enough.

If the material is protected by copyright, is the name of the copyright holder given?

Are references cited fully?

Documentation indicates that the author has consulted other sources and this serves to authenticate the information.

Caution here: Some works cited are they themselves bogus.

Currency:

Is the page dated? How up to date is the study or the site?

The dates provided may have a variety of meanings: when the material was first written; when the material was first placed on the Web; or when the material was last revised.

How current are the links?

If links are broken/blind it's a hint that the page is out of date.

Red Flag!

Authors aren't identified or contact information is missing.

Bias and conflicts of interest are obvious.

An essay or scholarly site with no bibliography or works cited page.

Red Flag!

Too many links to 'This page cannot be displayed'!

Remember that the Internet has only been around since 1995, so be wary of dates.