Evaluating Web Sites and Other Electronic Sources

Because anyone can put almost anything online, it is necessary to critically evaluate information you find.

Web sites are often a blend of information, entertainment, and advertising. This can make determining the credibility of a web site difficult. However, if you apply specific criteria and ask certain questions about the information a web site or electronic source provides, you have a better chance of finding reliable material.

Use the following checklist as a general guideline:

Authority

☐ Does the site have a named author or organization? *If not, be wary!*
☐ What are the author's qualifications (i.e. PhD, M.A. etc) or expertise to write on the topic?
    Look to see if the author has written any other works, including books and articles.
☐ Is contact information for the author or the sponsor/publisher provided?
☐ What is the relationship between the author and the site's sponsoring institution or organization?
    Is the author acting as a spokesperson for the organization?

Accuracy   *A good writer always checks and double-checks the reliability of sources*

☐ Does the site document the sources used? Is the accuracy of the information verifiable?
☐ Can you determine that the information been independently edited/fact-checked?
☐ Is the information provided scholarly, popular, governmental or from a business?
☐ Is the material from original research, experiments, observation, interviews, books, journals, or other documents?
☐ How does the information compare with what you already know?
☐ Is a bibliography or list of references provided?

Currency   *Using outdated information can have serious consequences, especially in the sciences or in law.*

☐ Is the site up-to-date?
☐ When was the information created?
☐ When was the information last updated?
☐ Are the links expired or current?

Point of View   *You should be able to detect objectivity and subjectivity in a source.*

☐ Whose point of view/perspective is given?
☐ Is the author offering an opinion or giving a factual report (such as a news item)?
☐ Is the author promoting an agenda?
☐ Can you identify objective writing (both sides of the argument)
☐ Can you identify a subjective bias (expressing one's own point of view)?
☐ To what extent is the information trying to sway the opinion of the audience?
☐ Is there advertising on the page? Are advertisers using the page to sell you something because it has a large number of "hits?"
    Take care not to confuse high traffic with quality

After applying the guidelines, ask whether or not the document/site is appropriate for your research

Audience - To Whom Is the Author Addressing the Page?

The *domain name* and the source of the URL web address of the page can indicate the site's intended audience. Knowing this provides clues about the site's value and reliability.

Common Domain Names

| Domain	Meaning	Example
.edu	Educational - Created by faculty, students, or staff at a college or university	www.shc.edu
.gov	Government - Created by a government agency or office	www.whitehouse.gov
.org	Organization - In most cases the site was created by a non-profit organization	www.pbs.org
.com	Commercial - In most cases the site was created for a commercial, for-profit purpose	www.amazon.com
.net	Network - Often indicates that the site was created by a person, group, affiliated with the same internet service provider	www.earthlink.net
.mil	Created by the U.S. Military. May be unavailable for security reasons.	www.army.mil
.al.us	Country, state (province) The US domain requires a state code as a second level domain You may use other country codes as well **Examples:** .uk (United Kingdom) .br (Brasil) .mx (Mexico) .fr (France)	www.state.al.us

Quick Check ☑

What is the purpose of the Web site?
Do a quick scan of the site. Can you determine its general purpose? Is it meant to:

☐ **INFORM**   e.g. about current events, new information, etc.
☐ **EXPLAIN**   e.g. teach, instruct, etc.
☐ **PERSUADE**   e.g. change your mind, sell you something, etc

Web Sites Fall Into the Following Broad Categories/Purposes:
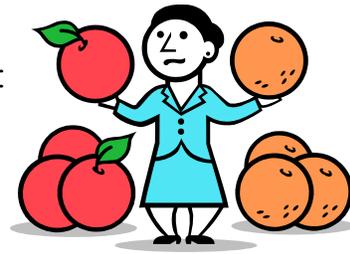
Advocacy Web Pages

☐ Sponsored by an organization attempting to influence public opinion (that is, one trying to sell ideas).
The URL of the page frequently ends in **.org** (organization).

Business / Marketing Web Pages

☐ Sponsored by a commercial enterprise (usually it is a page trying to promote or sell products).
The URL of the page frequently ends in **.com** (commercial)

Information Web Pages

☐ May be sponsored by an educational institution. The purpose is either to inform prospective students or educate current students.
The URL of the page will almost always end in **.edu**.

☐ Governments are the largest collectors and producers of information.
The URL of the page frequently ends in **.gov**

News Web Pages

☐ Media attempt to report current events, provide commentary, and to express opinion.
The URL of the page usually ends in **.com** (commercial)

Personal Web Pages

☐ Published by an individual who may or may not be affiliated with a larger institution.
The URL of the page may have a variety of endings:
e.g. *.com, .edu*, *.net,* etc., a tilde (~) is frequently found somewhere in the URL.

Additional Considerations

☐ Because web sites are creative with their presentation, layout, and styles additional challenges may surface.
☐ Search engines may retrieve pages out of context.
It is always important to return to the home page of a site to find the correct publisher and author information.
☐ Be aware that you can easily be taken to other sites that may not provide a link to return you to your original site.
☐ With use of frames, you may not realize that you have been taken to another site.
☐ Graphics can distract you from the main content of a site.

Remember! There may be an effective print alternative in your library that better fits your research needs or can verify some of the information you find on the web. Consult the library reference staff to find the best information resources, both print and web.

References:

Jurgens, Jane. "Evaluation of Web and Print Resources." Minneapolis Community and Technical College, 1999.
  url: http://www.mctc.mnscu.edu/Library/tutorials/infolit/tablesversion/lessons/evaluation.pdf

Tate, Marsha. "Teaching Critical Evaluation Skills for World Wide Web Resources."
  Computers in Libraries (November/December 1996) 49-55.

NB, BH 8/2002