

Evaluating Websites

“Can’t I just find it on the internet?”

In some cases, yes; but there are several reasons to be skeptical about what you find online. This handout will explain some of these reasons and give you a better idea of how to choose sources for your assignments.

Up until the 1990s, academic communication was based in a **print environment**. This environment has five basic criteria for evaluating books, articles, and other sources of information. Now that the print-based environment is integrated with **electronic publishing** (i.e., websites), these criteria are just as relevant, but they need some adjustment.

| Traditional Criteria for Print Materials | Criteria for Internet Materials |
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| <p>1. Accuracy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How reliable is the information? ○ Can you tell if there are errors or omissions? ○ Was it read by editors or fact checkers? ○ Does the information directly contradict what you’ve read elsewhere? | <p>Most print publications go through several layers of editors or reviewers who closely read the content to ensure accuracy before it is sent to the printer. Because it is relatively easy for individuals of any persuasion to publish on the Web, this editorial step is often bypassed.</p> <p>An openly edited source, such as Wikipedia, <i>may</i> contain content that has been verified by several people, who <i>may</i> be very knowledgeable about the subject. However, the writers and editors of websites are often anonymous and their credentials are not stated. Compare this to a print encyclopedia, where the names and affiliations of each contributor are typically listed on the first few pages.</p> |
| <p>2. Authority:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What qualifies the author to write on the subject? ○ What else has the author written? ○ What sources does the author cite? ○ Is the publisher well-known for high quality material? | <p>It’s often difficult to determine authorship of Web resources. Clicking links labeled something like “About Us” or “Contact Us” can yield names, but unless the name appears directly at the beginning or end of the text, you may not be able to tell who wrote it. Even when an author’s name is listed, his or her qualifications are seldom included.</p> |

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| <p>2. Authority (continued from first page)</p> | <p>The publisher in the case of most websites is the same person who wrote the content. The host of the website, however, can lend authority to a page. For example, if the page is part of a university or government website, it is likely to be reliable. In the US, there are several common domains that tell you something about where the information is coming from:</p> <p>.edu is used by educational institutions .gov is used by the government .com is used by commercial enterprises .net is used by internet service providers</p> |
| <p>3. Objectivity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Does the author have a noticeable bias? ○ Does the writing encourage you to form a particular opinion, or does it present information and allow you to make your own judgments? | <p>On the Web, the aims of persons or groups who present material are often not clearly stated. Of course, they are not often clearly stated in the print format either. The best way to gain a sense of a writer's bias is to read as much as possible about whatever subject you're researching, take notes, and compare how the information is presented.</p> |
| <p>4. Currency:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How current is the content of the work? ○ Is the publication date clearly indicated? | <p>Dates are not always included on Web pages. If a date does appear somewhere on the screen, it could have various meanings. It might be the date the document was first created, the date it was placed on the Web, or the date it was last revised.</p> |
| <p>5. Coverage:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What topics are discussed in the material? ○ Are they explored in depth? Or are they summarized or just briefly mentioned? | <p>Coverage of a given subject in electronic format tends to be cursory (not in-depth). Often a website will not cover facets of a topic itself, but instead link to other websites that do. This presents a problem because as soon as you go to another website, you have to start the evaluation process all over again.</p> <p>With a book, you can quickly determine the scope of coverage by observing its thickness and skimming the table of contents and index. Some websites include a "Site Map" that serves a similar purpose.</p> |

Challenges of the Web

- **Hypertext Links:** In many cases, a high-quality website will have links to websites that are not of as high a quality.
Solution: Evaluate each page independently.
- **Frames:** Frames make it possible to display separate web pages on one screen.
Solution: Evaluate each frame independently. To avoid frames, right-click on a link and select “Open in New Window.”
- **Search Engines, part 1:** Search engines can retrieve pages out of context.
Solution: Look for a link to the “Home” or “Main” page to determine the source of information.
- **Search Engines, part 2:** Search engines (such as Google, Yahoo, MSN) are developed by companies that depend upon advertising revenue. A search result list is generated by complex formulas that may place websites that have contributed money to the search engine company at the top of the list. Sometimes they will be sectioned off under a heading like “Sponsored Links”; sometimes not. This differs from the search engines you use in library-sponsored databases, which sort results by relevance or date.
Solution: Do not rely on the first ten search results alone; skim the majority of the list.
- **Instability of Web pages:** Due to factors like upgrading, server space, and neglectful website managers, pages may change addresses or disappear entirely.
Solution: Print whatever information you think will be useful to you; document sources to the fullest extent possible (include an access date, the complete URL, etc.)
- **Susceptibility to Alteration:** Whether accidental or deliberate, alterations to websites are common, and content can change considerably.
Solution: Always print out a copy of whatever sources you use for an assignment. If the date you accessed it and the URL are not automatically printed on the page, write them down.

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Sounds like a lot of work, right? It is; searching the Web isn't necessarily faster just because you can find electronic documents quickly with keyword searches. As you evaluate more and more, it will become easier to distinguish what is reliable and what is not.

Questions? Ask a Librarian!

Reference Desk Location: Rebecca Crown Library, Lower Level

Reference Desk Phone Number: 708-524-6875

Email: reference@dom.edu