Should I Use this Website for My Research Project?
Five Criteria for Evaluating Web Sites

Remember that anyone can create a web site. Many of us now use the Internet as a primary source for research. It is convenient and there is a wealth of information available. But all information is not created equal; not all information found on the Internet is accurate and/or credible. One rule of thumb is to try to get the data from the original source if possible; many times there is a link to the original source or a citation for the original source on a particular web site. If so, use it!

When you are using the Internet for research for your courses, you must use scholarly, credible sources. It is your responsibility to evaluate and select sources that are credible. Here are five criteria for evaluating Internet sources.

1. **AUTHORITY**
   - **Who wrote the page?** The author should be clearly identified. There should also be some biographical information about the author providing her/his credentials. These should also indicate whether the author is affiliated with an institution or organization. This should provide you with information to determine whether the person is an “expert” in this content area.
   - **What organization/entity is sponsoring the page?** What is the site’s domain? The information in the URL can provide information about the site’s mission or purpose. Be wary of sites that are trying to sell you a product or a belief. These are common domains:
     - `org`: Web site for a non-profit organization. Some of these organizations may be advocacy groups.
     - `com`: A site for a company who is usually trying to sell something.
     - `edu`: A site connected to an educational institution.
     - `gov`: A site of a federal or state government agency.
     - `mil`: A site of a military entity
     - `.us`: Often used by local or state governments (e.g. `.tx.us`)
     - `.uk` (United Kingdom: A site originating in another country (each country has a 2 letter code)).
     - `~`: A tilde is within a website is usually used for person’s individual folder.
• **Is there contact information for the author and/or sponsoring organization?**
  Most responsible and credible authors will provide a means for you to contact him/her. There should be a phone number, postal or email address for you to contact the author and/or sponsor.

2. **ACCURACY**

Anyone can post information on a web site. It is the responsibility of the user to check the site for accuracy and determine whether to use the information on the site. One way to check accuracy is the check the information found on the site with information found from a credible source. The source that you use to verify the information may be another internet source or a print source. If you find that the information cannot be verified, it may be best not to use that information.

Here are some additional questions to help you evaluate the site’s accuracy:

• Is the factual information on the side documented?
• Does the site have a particular point of view or bias?
• Does the site have a bibliography?
• Are there spelling and/or grammatical errors?
• If the site has statistical information, does it define the measures, provide sources of the data, or other information on methodology?

**CURRENCY**

If you are searching for historical information, the data that the web site was last updated may not matter. But if you are looking for current information, it is important to check that the information on the site is current.

• Is there a date connected to the specific information you are seeking?
• Is there a date at the top or bottom of the page?
• If the site has links, are the links up-to-date? Broken links may signal an out-dated page.

**USEFULNESS/PURPOSE**

When you use a search engine to find information on a topic, you must determine if the site is useful. You will use the strategies listed about to help you determine the purpose of the page and whether it will be useful for you. Some questions to ask?

• What is the purpose of the site? Does the author want you to believe something or purchase something?
• Who was the intended audience?
• Why did the author create it?
• Does it provide detailed information about your topic?
• Are there other links that may address your topic?
FUNCTIONALITY

Some sites are easy to navigate, while others are more challenging. The functionality does not necessarily determine whether a site is credible, but it may determine whether you wish to use it.

- Is the site easy to navigate?
- Is the design visually appealing and helpful?
- Can you search directly within the site?
- Is there a site map or index?
- Are there a lot of advertisements on the page?

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