



LIBRARY GUIDE

EVALUATING INTERNET RESOURCES

This series of handouts is designed to help you use particular resources. You can use these to get an idea about what materials are available through these sources and how to use them. If you need any assistance, please ask a reference librarian for help.

The Internet is a tremendous collection of information that is growing rapidly. Unfortunately, few of the sources are good resources for research. Anyone can and does put information online and no one controls the quality. Information can come from companies, communities, organizations, educational institutions and individual people. Data on one web page can be accurate and reliable, while the data on another can be inaccurate, unreliable or even deliberately false. As you use the Internet for research, you must critically analyze the information you find or you will use bad materials.

AVAILABILITY: *Is the information you are looking actually on the Internet? For reasons of copyright or lack of demand, many research quality sources will not be available or will be available through purchase only. Some reasons for information being unavailable are:*

- X *Publishers and authors who provide information in the marketplace are not likely to offer their materials for free on the Internet and lose their income.*
- X *Offering access to information through the Internet is expensive and takes time. Not all organizations can afford to do this or do this for older publications.*
- X *Information important to researchers is often not in demand by the general public. Few providers will spend the time and money to give access to materials few people want.*
- X *Some types of information are not easily disseminated on the Internet, such as numerical or graphical data or large audio and video resources. Text is more easy to find.*
- X *Some information is unavailable anywhere. While many questions get asked, not every topic gets researched or published on.*

Keep these guidelines in mind when deciding what to look for on the Internet.

EVALUATION CRITERIA: *In traditional print resources, accuracy, authority, objectivity, currency and coverage are important criteria used to judge the quality of a source. The Internet doesn't have a special dispensation. Information there is subject to these criteria as well.*

Accuracy: *Information can be published quickly and easily on the Web. This hurts the general accuracy of Web resources because almost anyone can post something without having an editor examine or verify it. There are conventions in the print publishing process that help ensure accuracy. No process like this exists yet in the online world.*

Authority: *Again, there are no conventions on the Web for establishing authority, which is the person/group responsible for the information and their qualifications to speak on that topic. Even if an author is listed, his or her qualifications are rarely included. Some people online have no qualifications at all. For example, Holocaust deniers publish online.*

Objectivity: *The goals or aims of a group or person publishing something on the Internet are not always easy to discern. Since almost anyone can post information, many views that have been unable to find a more traditional outlet are now available alongside more reputable sources. It is often difficult to judge the legitimacy of the group disseminating the information. They may be online because their information is biased and unacceptable to a traditional publisher.*

Currency: *Material on Web pages is rarely dated. Dates that are included frequently indicate when the information was placed on the Web or when the last time the Web page was revised. But, information in a new format is not necessarily new information, especially when copyright law is in effect on newer, more accurate information. Old material is old, no matter where you find it.*

Coverage: *If a source has a print form as well as a Web form, the Web coverage may be different from the print coverage with no indication of this. In traditional publishing, print sources frequently list what subjects and dates are covered. This standard has not found its way to the Web yet.*

Quality materials on the Internet can be evaluated by these criteria. If you are unable to apply any of these criteria to a source, it is not good enough to use.

WEB REVIEWS: *One way to filter information you find on the Internet is to search using Web search engines that evaluate sources. All Web search engines search their own internal database of Web sources, NOT the entire Internet. Some browsers "review" sites. Depending on the search engine, you can opt to search in a smaller database of reviewed sites or the entire database if it is only of reviewed sites. For example, Michigan Electronic Library and Search Magellan are search engines that consist of only reviewed sites, while Lycos has a smaller database of reviewed sites as well as a large database of all sites they index.*

TYPES OF WEB PAGES: Applying the above criteria is impacted by the various types of web pages available. Each type has a particular point, which can help you determine how to evaluate the information available at a site.

Advocacy: An advocacy Web page promotes the ideas of the organization providing it. The sites attempt to influence public opinion and their addresses frequently, but not always end in .org. Some examples are the National Rifle Association, the National Right to Life Committee or the Democratic and Republican parties.

Marketing: A marketing or business Web page promotes the product of the company providing it. These sites attempt to influence public purchasing and their addresses frequently end in .com. Some examples are the Coca-Cola Company, Disney and other national and local businesses. Some marketing sites make an effort to look like an informational site so beware.

Informational: An informational Web page is intended to provide factual information. The addresses frequently end in .edu or .gov. For example, United States Census data is available at the Census Bureau Web site. Other materials available include college catalogs, calendars, dictionaries, etc. The U.S. government is a rich source of such pages.

News: A news Web page is intended to provide very up-to-date news. The addresses frequently end in .com and sometimes .org. Some examples include CNN, USA Today, the New York Times and National Public Radio. These sites are good for current events.

Personal: A personal Web page is provided by an individual. The materials and presentation can range widely and sometimes can look like another type of page. The addresses vary as well. In the past a tilde ~ was used, but is infrequent at present.

Some Web pages do not fit these categories, but most do. Understanding the purpose of the Web page is half the battle in analyzing the quality of the content. When you know the reason information has been provided, you can more easily determine whether it is deceptive, wrong, average or excellent information.

SPECIAL ISSUES: Once you have found information online and are ready to evaluate it, there are some circumstances that impact your evaluation and use that are unique to the online world. These are issues you should keep in mind as you decide what to use.

Links: Many Web sites offer links to related sites or sites that were just interesting to the person providing the first site. You **MUST** evaluate each site separately. A site that has a link from a reputable site does not necessarily have any of the qualities of the reputable site.

Software Requirements: Some Web sites use software that will limit access to critical sections by users without the needed software to display a chart, an audio clip or a video clip. Be aware you have not viewed the entire page without the software.

Search Engines: *Web search engines retrieve sites completely out of context most of the time. You may need to figure out what the original home page of a document is in order to determine the source. An example is searching by a country name. You may access an article on that country with no source information. You might for example need to locate the original home page to realize you are looking at a section of the CIA World Factbook.*

Instability: *Print sources are stable, meaning they can be easily located through time. Web sites, on the other hand, are unstable. The location of the site may change without warning or the site may even cease to exist. Since there is no guarantee information on the Web will continue to be available, be cautious when deciding to use one for an important project.*

Alteration: *Again, print sources are stable. The information in a book cannot be changed. Web sites can be modified on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. Since you cannot be sure that the information at a site has not been altered, intentionally or accidentally, you should check it against information found in other sources.*

EVALUATION: *After considering the above information about Web sites and resources, you are ready to use the Internet to find the wealth of good quality information available. Please do use these points to make sure you don't drown in the sea of wrong and deceptive information. Be a skillful information consumer. The following checklist is an easy way to apply these points.*

DON'T GO AWAY EMPTY HANDED!!! *If you are having trouble locating what you need, just ask for a reference librarian. We are here to help!*

INTERNET EVALUATION CHECKLIST

*The more questions you can answer yes to, the more likely the source is of high quality. Questions in **bold** must be answered yes for the source to be useful. Some of these may be inappropriate for a particular source and ones not included here may be important.*

ACCURACY:

Are the sources used for factual information clearly listed for verification? (i.e. did they cite their sources)

Is the information well edited? (i.e. free of spelling, grammar and typographical errors)

Can you determine who is ultimately responsible for the accuracy of the material?

Are statistical materials and charts clearly labeled for easy use?

Can you locate other sources to verify the accuracy of the information?

Is the information rated well by search engines that review sites?

AUTHORITY:

Can you tell who is sponsoring the page (i.e. organization, company, or government)?

Is there any information about the purpose of the sponsoring group?

If the sponsoring group allows others to publish web sites on their system, do they filter the information?

Is there information, other than an email address, on how to contact the sponsor to verify their legitimacy?

Can you tell who the author is?

*Can you tell if the author is qualified to write about this subject?
(i.e. education, experience and affiliation)*

Can you tell if the material is protected by copyright? Almost all is!!!!

If the material is copyright protected, who holds the copyright and how do you contact them for permission to use it if you want to copy an image or text?

OBJECTIVITY:

Is the information provided free as a public service?

Is the site free of advertising, both in the text and in the graphics?

If advertising present, is it clearly separated from the information content?

Is the sponsoring group unbiased? (i.e. not advocating a particular product or viewpoint)

Can you tell who the intended audience is?

CURRENCY:

Is it clear when the information on the page was first written? 1999 or 1909?

Is it clear when the page was first placed on the Web?

Is it clear when the page was last revised?

Is there any other information to indicate that the material is kept current?

If the information is statistical or graphical in nature, does it indicate when the data was gathered?

If the information has been published in multiple editions, is there any indication what edition the information on the page came from?

COVERAGE:

Can you determine if the page is under construction or is completed?

If the source has a print equivalent, can you tell if the entire source or only a portion is available through the Web page?

If the information is from a source out of copyright, can you tell what has been done to update the material?

Are all aspects of the subject covered?

Can you tell if the information is limited by time period, format or types of materials covered?

There are a variety of ways to check for this information, including in some print sources. Please talk with a reference librarian if you are unsure of how to find the information.