

Evaluating Websites: Information Literacy Guide

Guide Information

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Description: Learn to distinguish between trustworthy / untrustworthy information on the web

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Countless web pages are available on just about every topic, but how can you know what's worthwhile or credible? Evaluation of web pages and websites has become a necessary part of the research process, and a means to sharpen your own critical thinking skills. Some of the fundamental questions to consider during evaluation are:

AUTHORSHIP

Note that "author" can mean a person or organization.

- Who is the author of the website?
- What are the author's credentials? Is the author an authority on the subject? Is it another student? A professor? Your next door neighbor?
- Is the author an organization? What do you know (or what can you find out) about this organization? What is its purpose?

ACCURACY

Information must be judged accurate and verifiable before you use it in your own research or assignments.

- Is the site edited well? Are there spelling or grammatical errors? Is it written in a style that you would expect for the topic and audience?
- Don't accept the information at face value - you'll need to take time to consult other sources (including non-web sources) to verify accuracy fully
- Does the information on the site "fit" with other information that you have on the topic? Or are there discrepancies with other sources of information?
- Does the author provide a way to verify information on this site? Are footnotes, citations, or sources provided?

CURRENCY

Look at both the date of publication and update, as well as the dates for any cited information.

- Is the page or website being updated and maintained?
- When was the page written? Last updated or revised?
- How current is the information? Does this fit your needs? Note that website content written in May 2008 might contain information from 1975.
- Be aware that "Last updated" may mean any update on the page, including stylistic changes such as different colors or layout - not necessarily changes to content.

CONTENT

Does the information on the website meet your research or information needs?

- How detailed is the information - is it basic or advanced?
- Is the coverage of the topic complete? Does it leave out important information? Does it offer more than one perspective?
- Is the web page part of a longer document? Sometimes you will need to look at more than one page to get the complete picture.
- Is there a bibliography or links to other information on the topic? How were the links selected? Are the other sources mentioned relevant and credible?
- How does the content compare with other resources (books, journal articles, other web pages) on the same topic?

PURPOSE

The purpose of the site should be clear. Be aware that some sites present opinion as fact in order to sell or persuade.

- Does this site present fact or opinion?
- What is the purpose of the site? To inform? To sell? To persuade?
- Is the site objective, showing multiple sides of an issue? Bias is not necessarily reason to reject a source - but be sure that you can identify it.
- Who is the intended audience? Advanced researchers in a field? Elementary school students? Members of a particular organization or viewpoint?
- If there is advertising on the page, does this affect the content?

DESIGN

Visual layout, choice of images and media files often have an impact on a website's professional credibility.

- What kind of information - textual, visual, aural - does the page present, and does this add or detract from the page's usefulness or legibility?
- Do image or other media files slow down load time or navigation through the website?
- Do the different design components work, or are images, sound files, etc. unable to display, play, or run?
- Does the web page require specific add-on software in order to read, see, print, or listen to resources linked on the page? Is that add-on software readily available or must it be purchased?