

## Evaluating Websites: Criteria and Techniques



“On the Internet, no one knows you’re a dog”

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### Criteria for Evaluating Websites:

Think about the cartoon above. What does it tell you about the internet? You can type almost anything in a web search engine and retrieve information; it is easy and fast and accessible 24/7. But, is the information accurate? Who wrote it? How recently has it been updated? Can you trust it? All these questions must be answered by YOU, the internet searcher. The web does not have an editor! Print publications (most of them anyway) go through an editing process to ensure the information is accurate and credible. On the web, anyone can publish anything and no one is checking for you to make sure the information is valid. When conducting internet research for academic projects, you must hold the information you find to a very high standard. Read the following criteria and apply them to any web sources you use for PHS research projects:

#### 1. Authorship: Who put up the site?

- The name of the individual or organization creating the site should be clearly stated.
- The site should list the credentials of the author, whether it be an individual or an organization.
- The site should provide a way for users to contact the author and to make comments or ask questions.

## 2. Purpose: Every site has a reason for being on the web

- A site's purpose should be clear and its content should reflect its purpose, be it to inform, entertain, persuade, educate or sell.
- Bias (if any) should be clearly stated through a mission statement or "about us" section or elsewhere on the site.

## 3. Content & Currency: Is the information authoritative and up to date?

- The information should be accurate and the site should be updated regularly, especially if the topic is time-sensitive.
- The site's content should be easy to read and easy to understand by its intended audience.
- The site should offer enough information to make it worth visiting.

## 4. Technical Aspects

- A search function should be provided for sites with large amounts of information.
- You should not have to pay to view the information on the site.
- Spelling and grammar should always be correct.
- Links to more information should be provided.
- Graphics on the site should be relevant and appropriate to the content.
- Advertising should be limited.

Note: the websites you use for school research do not need to meet every one of these criteria. However, the more of them a site does meet, the more likely it is to be a credible, authoritative resource and the less likely it is that your teacher will question it as a valid source.

### Techniques for Web Evaluation:

1. Authorship: This is THE most important part of web evaluation! You must be able to find out who (either a person or an organization) is responsible for the information on the site. Try the following techniques:
  - Look around the perimeter of the webpage and see if you can find links that say "About Us" or "Philosophy" or "Background" or "Who We are" etc.

- If you cannot find links of this sort, truncate back the URL by deleting the end characters of the URL, stopping before each /. Press enter to see if this brings you to a page with information about the author. Continue the process on slash at a time until you reach the first single / which is usually the home page of the site.
2. **Credentials:** Once you've figured out who authored the site (either an individual or an organization), look for the credentials of that person or organization. Decide whether the author is qualified to write about the subject of the site.
  3. Not sure if the author is qualified? Your next step is to see if the information presented has been carefully documented or "cited." This means the author has given the source(s) for information presented on the website. Check that the sources are valid. Are they from reputable reference books? Scholarly journals? Websites of experts on the topic?
  4. Still not sure about author credentials?
    - Try googling the author to see what you can find out about the person or organization. It helps to enclose the author's name in quotes to find an exact match. But, you need to evaluate this web source as well! Be sure you are getting information about the author from a reputable source.
    - Learn what types of websites link to the site you've found. You can do a link search in Google or Yahoo by typing in `link:` followed by the URL of the site you're investigating (no space between the : and the start of the URL). This will show you all the sites that link to the site you're investigating. Ask yourself if these sites are reputable.
  5. Read some "content pages" - those that give information about the topic of the site. Does the information seem accurate based on what you already know about the topic? Does it seem biased? Opinionated? Factual? If you do not know anything about the topic, check the information on the site against information from an established, reputable source such as an encyclopedia or other reference book. Check the site's mission statement for potential bias.

6. Check the last update: usually noted on the bottom of the home page but not always - you may have to hunt for it! Note: Some reputable websites do not include a date which can be frustrating.
7. Examine the URL: You can use the end of a domain name to help you judge the validity of the information and the potential bias of the website. Remember, this strategy is only a guideline. People can easily purchase domains that do not reflect their actual purpose:
  - .com = commercial sites (vary in their credibility - avoid for school research)
  - .gov = U.S. government site
  - .org = organization, often nonprofit (Some .orgs are biased)
  - .edu = school or university site (Was it created by a K-12 class? By a college student? By a university department? By a scholar?)
  - .store = retail business
  - .int = international institution
  - .ac = educational institution, usually higher education (like .edu)
  - .mil = U.S. military site
  - .net = networked service provider, Internet administrative site
  - .museum = museum
  - .name = individual Internet user
  - .biz = a business
  - .pro = professional's site
  - ~ = personal site (Be a little suspicious of personal sites. They are not endorsed by the institution on whose server they reside. For example, many college students have personal websites posted on their college's site.)

8. Putting it all together: If the website you found provides:

- author name, acceptable author credentials and a way to contact the author
- a clear statement of purpose or mission
- accurate information (as measured by the citations for information on the site OR by what you already know about the topic OR by comparing it to information from an authoritative source)
- up-to-date information

Then, you have probably found a good website for school research! If you are in any doubt about the validity of information you find on the web, ask the librarian or your teacher or an outside expert on your topic.