

Evaluating Online Resources

Your online course instructor may ask you to conduct some research over the Internet. Did you know that anyone can post anything on the Internet? Since that's the case, it is up to you, as the information consumer, to decide what is worthwhile, and what is not.

One of the tools you can use to evaluate a particular webpage or website, is a free service used to look up the name of the web domain, WHOIS
<http://www.networksolutions.com/whois/index.ihtml>

Below are some other tips that might help you assess and evaluate the information that you find online. You can also check out an online tutorial about evaluation information from the OU Library System: Evaluating and Citing Sources <http://libraries.ou.edu/help/tutorials/module.asp?tutorial=9&module=2>.

Types of web sites

Generally, websites can be divided into the following types:

- Advocacy
- Business/marketing
- News
- Informational
- Personal

The type of site can tell you something about the “credibility” or “accuracy” of the information it provides.

- An **Informational** web page is one whose purpose is to present factual information. The URL (or web address) frequently ends in .edu or .gov. Many of these pages are sponsored by educational institutions or government agencies.
- An **Advocacy** web page is one sponsored by an organization attempting to influence public opinion (that is, one trying to sell ideas). The URL (or web address) of the page frequently ends in .org (organization).
- A **Business/Marketing** web page is one sponsored by a commercial enterprise (usually trying to promote or sell products). The URL (or web address) of the page frequently ends in .com (commercial).
- A **News** web page is one whose primary purpose is to provide extremely current information. The URL (or web address) of the page usually ends in .com (commercial).
- A **Personal** web page is one published by an individual who may or may not be affiliated with a larger institution.

Although the intent is a little different for each type of website, essentially the same evaluation criteria apply.

Evaluating Web Sites

Below is a list of the main things you should think about when evaluating a website.

- **Authority:**
 - Is the person or organization responsible for the content of the page given?
 - Are the author's qualifications clearly stated?
 - Are the purpose and goals of the sponsoring organization given?
 - Is there a statement of organizational approval?
 - Can the legitimacy of the page's sponsor or author be verified?
 - If the material is protected by copyright, is the name of the individual or organizational copyright holder given?
- **Accuracy:**
 - Are sources given for factual or statistical information so they can be verified in another source?
 - Is it clear who has the ultimate responsibility for the accuracy of the content of the material?
 - Is the information free of grammatical, spelling, and other typographical errors? (These kinds of errors not only indicate a lack of quality control, but also can actually produce inaccuracies in information.)
- **Objectivity:**
 - Can you detect some explicit or implicit bias in the presentation of the information?
 - Is the information free of advertising?
 - If there is any advertising on the page, is it clearly separated from the informative content?
 - Does the site contain dates that tell you
 - When the page was first written?
 - When the page was first placed on the web?
 - When the page was last revised? (Is it current, i.e., last 6 months?)
 - Are there any other indications that the material is reviewed and updated regularly?
 - Is statistical information clearly dated?
 - Are links relevant, appropriate, and current (i.e., no "dead" links)?
- **Coverage:**
 - Is there an indication that the page is complete (i.e., not "under construction")?
 - If there is a print equivalent to the web page, is it clear where the complete document is available (i.e., on the web or in print)?
 - Does the site describe the audience for whom it is intended?

- **Design:**

- Does the website follow good graphic design principles? Is it easy to navigate?
- How usable is the site? How readable is the site? (white space, font size, etc.)
- Do the graphics serve a function? Do the graphics interfere with the page downloading?
- Do icons clearly represent what is intended, or are they labeled?

References:

Adapted from: Alexander, J., & Tate, M. (1996, July). Evaluating web resources. Wolfgram Memorial Library, Widener University, Chester, PA: available online at: <http://www.science.widener.edu/~withers/webeval.htm>

Grassian, E. (1998, October). Thinking critically about world wide web resources. UCLA College Library.