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Evaluating Web Sites

Why do we have to evaluate web sites?

In the United States, putting information online is easy and inexpensive and much of what gets posted is unmonitored. There is no “quality control” determining what can and cannot be posted online, or examining content for accuracy. That’s where web site evaluation comes in: it’s up to you to use critical thinking skills and approach every web site with healthy skepticism. Mixed in with all the junk is a lot of valuable information— it’s up to you to find and recognize it!

Criteria for evaluating web sites

1. Who wrote the information?

<i>Questions to ask:</i>	<i>Things to look for:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What are the author’s credentials? ▪ Is the information in their field of expertise? ▪ Can you contact the author? ▪ Do other trustworthy sources of information cite this author? ▪ Can you confirm information about him or her elsewhere? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Author biography ▪ Affiliations with a university/organization/business ▪ If the info is not on the page you’re reading, try looking at the “About Us” page ▪ Verify what you can: visit affiliate sites, Google the author, etc.

2. Who is sponsoring the web site?

<i>Questions to ask:</i>	<i>Things to look for:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Can you easily identify who has created the site? ▪ Why did they create it (what is the site’s purpose)? ▪ Who has contributed funding, services, or material to the site? ▪ Is the site for profit? Do they sell anything? ▪ What bias might these factors bring to the site’s information? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Web address endings, which can provide some initial information about the nature of the site & the sponsor’s intent: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ .gov (for government agencies) ✓ .edu (for educational institutions) ✓ .org (for professional and nonprofit organizations) ✓ .com (for “commercial” sites, e.g. company or personal sites) ▪ Read the “About Us” page

3. Is the web site objective?

<i>Questions to ask:</i>	<i>Things to look for:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Is the information clearly fact, fiction, opinion, advertising, or...? ▪ If information is presented as opinion, what are the qualifications of the person or organization behind it? ▪ Remember to consider the purpose of the site and who publishes/sponsors it. Does this contribute possible bias to the information? ▪ Is the information verifiable? Are there citations? Links to other trustworthy online sites or sources? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Supporting evidence and facts ▪ Citations and links to their sources of information ▪ Inclusion of or links to opposing viewpoints ▪ Language/words intended to persuade or cause emotional reactions

4. Is the information current?

Questions to ask:	Things to look for:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ When was the information posted? Last updated? Copyrighted?▪ Is the site being updated/maintained and will it still be around the next time you want it?▪ Does your topic require that you have current information? Is the site current enough for your topic?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Any date indicating when the information was posted, last updated or copyrighted▪ Date information from data used in the site's content (e.g. "based on 1980 U.S. Census data...") or in the site's citations▪ Broken links (possible sign that the page/site isn't being maintained)

5. How is the information presented?

Questions to ask:	Things to look for:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Do you need special software or programs to use the information?▪ Is the site free?▪ Is it well written?▪ Who is the information written for? The intended audience can influence the writing style, depth, and perspective on the material.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Special software downloads▪ Requests for payment▪ Requirement that you create a "free" account to view information▪ Typos, grammatical errors, etc.▪ If they have reprinted information, is it retyped (lots of room for error/omissions, etc.)? Do they provide a link to/citation for the original source of info?

Want to go the extra mile to investigate a site?

Fact-checking sites

- **Snopes.com:** www.snopes.com – the truth behind urban legends and rumors
- **FactCheck.org:** www.factcheck.org – fact-checking on politicians and political issues
- **Politifact:** www.politifact.com – fact-checking on politicians and political issues

Tracing links to a web site

Find out if other web sites are providing links to the site you are investigating. If an expert in the field or a government agency provides a link to a site, does the site seem more legitimate?

▪ "link:" search

- Write down or copy the web address of the site you want to investigate
- Go to the Google home page and type (don't forget the colon!): *link:*
- Type or paste in the web address of the site under investigation (don't use a space after *link:*)

example: link:www.siskiyous.edu

- Another trick: "site:" allows you to limit your results to specific types of sites (e.g. .com, .gov, .edu, etc.). You can combine *site:* with *link:* to limit your results to only specific types of sites that link to your site
example: if you want to know if any government sites link to the site you are investigating, type in your *link:* search followed by your *site:* information: *link:www.siskiyous.edu site:.gov*

▪ alexa.com search

- Write down or copy the web address of the site you want to investigate
- Go to www.alexa.com
- Type or paste in the web address of the site under investigation

Historical research

Sometimes it can be helpful to see how a web site has changed over time. *The Internet Archives* keeps old versions of web sites in their **Wayback Machine:** <http://archive.org/web/web.php>.