

Evaluating Internet Sources

Is that website you found on your topic a good source – worthy of citing in a research paper? Well, complete this handy scoring guide and find out ...

_____ (10) Is it accurate? Do you know the information is correct?

Why worry?

- Anyone can publish anything on the Web
- Unlike traditional print resources, web resources rarely have editors or fact-checkers
- No universal web standards exist to ensure accuracy

What do you need to find out?

_____ (5) Before even checking the validity of the facts, do you see frequent spelling and grammatical errors on the page? This is always a good sign of the care which this person or organization puts into the website

_____ (5) Are the facts and claims made on the website well-supported? Does the website list its own sources or does it otherwise present convincing evidence for its claims (for example, does it link to other authoritative websites on the subject or is it an authoritative source by itself)?

_____ (10) Is it credible and authoritative? Can you trust the website?

Why worry?

- Anyone can publish anything on the Web
- It's often hard to determine a web page's authorship
- Even if a page is signed, qualifications aren't usually given
- Sponsorship isn't usually indicated

What do you need to find out?

_____ (5) Look at the top or bottom of the page – can identify the individual or organization that is responsible for the website? Are they well-known and respected or are their credentials otherwise clear and verifiable? Make sure the site is not a subtle satire or otherwise set up as a joke.

_____ (5) Can you find an “about us” or “contact” or “FAQ” (Frequently Asked Questions) link for the website (you might have to go to the “homepage” of the site to find it)? Is it clear from the website why this individual or organization should be considered experts or authorities on the issue?

_____ (10) Is it objective and balanced? If it is biased, is the source is at least reliably representing its side on the issue?

Why worry?

- Frequently the goals of the sponsors/authors aren't clearly stated
- Often the Web serves as a virtual soapbox – a place for people to espouse their own personal attitudes and opinions

What do you need to find out?

**If you are looking for facts about an issue:*

_____ (5) Is the page biased? Does it only show one side of the issue? Is it attempting to sway its audience to one side of the debate? Look closely. Even if you are at a “news” site (time.com, nytimes.com. etc), you might be reading one of their editorials. A biased source ultimately is not the best source for facts.

_____ (5) Even if the page seems objective, look more closely. Do they accept advertising? Might the advertising be revealing a conflict of interest that could indicate a subtle bias in the presentation of the material?

**If you are looking for an opinion on an issue:*

_____ (5) Does the website attempt to hide its bias? Or does the website clearly state that it is offering an opinion (for example, is it part of the “opinion” “op-ed” or “perspective” section of a newspaper)? As a general rule, the more open and honest a website is, the more trustworthy is its content.

_____ (5) Does the website provide support (sources, references to other websites, etc) for its opinions? Or is the author just spouting off the top of her or his head?

_____ (10) Is it timely? Is the information up-to-date?

Why worry?

- Publication or revision dates not always provided.
- If a date is provided, it may have various meanings. For example,
 - It may indicate when the material was first written
 - It may indicate when the material was first placed on the Web
 - It may indicate when the material was last revised

What do you need to find out?

_____ (5) Is the page dated? If so, when was the last update? Can you tell from the content of the page whether the author knows the recent research or news about her or his topic?

_____ (5) How current are the links? Have some expired or moved?

_____ (40) Total

35-40 – very reliable source (worthy of inclusion in your research paper)

30-35 – somewhat reliable source – (parts of it might be worthy of inclusion in your research paper, although it should be used with caution and only when additional sources verify the information)

0-30 – unreliable source (do not use it – run very, very far away from it)

This guides owes much credit to:

Beck, Susan. "Evaluation Criteria." *The Good, The Bad & The Ugly: or, Why It's a Good Idea to Evaluate Web Sources*. 2005. <http://lib.nmsu.edu/instruction/evalcrit.html>