Evaluating Information

Five Criteria for Evaluating Information Quality

A. **Accuracy** -- is the information reliable and error free?
   - Is there an editor or someone who verifies/checks the information? Is it peer-reviewed?
   - Is there adequate documentation: bibliography, footnotes, credits, quotations?
   - Are the conclusions justified by the information presented?

   If you are unable to verify accuracy based on these 3 bulleted items, look outside the source itself (do additional research): Is the information verified in other sources? Do experts agree on the findings?

B. **Authority** -- Is the source of the information reputable?
   - What are the author's qualifications? staff reporter? scholar in field?
   - How did you find the information? Did you use an electronic magazine database, references from the bibliography of another work, a search engine for the Internet?
   - What type of source is it? Sensationalistic? Popular? Scholarly?
   - What is the reputation of the publisher?

   If no individual is taking responsibility for the article, who is? What is the publisher's reputation for guaranteeing accuracy? (If no author is given on a web page, is the sponsor of the page reputable? If the sponsor is also not indicated on the web page, can you determine its origin from the URL and digging deeper into its website)

C. **Objectivity** -- Does the information show bias?
   - Does the source show political or cultural biases?

   If you are unable to determine objectivity based on the bulleted items above, look outside the source (do more research): Do other sources provide other viewpoints?

D. **Currency** - When was the information published? When was the information collected?
   - Is it current?
   - Does it reflect the time period about which you are concerned?

E. **Coverage** -- Does it provide the evidence or information you need?
   - Does it answer questions you have about the topic?
   - Is the audience for which it is intended appropriate for your purposes? (professional, layperson, child, adult?)
   - Is it suitable for your level of understanding? (too simple, too difficult?)
   - Is the information in the appropriate format? (print, electronic, video, sound?)

   Does it cover the topic(s) you need? Does it provide the main points or concepts you need? Do its major findings add to your understanding? Do they support or refute your original ideas on the topic?
Special Considerations When Evaluating Web Pages

Every item you find when searching the Internet must be suspect until you find proof of its reliability.

Types of Web Pages


Advocacy Web Page "is one sponsored by an organization attempting to influence public opinion (that is, one trying to sell ideas). The URL address of the page frequently ends in .org (organization). Examples: National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League, the National Right to Life Committee, the Democratic Party, the Republican Party.

Business/Marketing Web Page "is one sponsored by a commercial enterprise (usually it is a page trying to promote or sell products). The URL address of the page frequently ends in .com (commercial). Examples: Adobe Systems, Inc., the Coca Cola Company, and numerous other large and small companies using the Web for business purposes.”

News Web Page "is one whose primary purpose is to provide extremely current information. The URL address of the page usually ends in .com (commercial). Examples: USA Today, Philadelphia Inquirer, CNN”

Informational Web Page “is one whose purpose is to present factual information. The URL Address frequently ends in .edu or .gov, as many of these pages are sponsored by educational institutions or government agencies. Examples: Dictionaries, thesauri, directories, transportation schedules, calendars of events, statistical data, and other factual information such as reports, presentations of research, or information about a topic.

Personal Web Page “is one published by an individual who may or may not be affiliated with a larger institution. The URL address of the page may have a variety of endings (e.g. .com, .edu, etc.)…”

Making a first pass at evaluating a web page

Get in the habit of checking for some key pieces of information when you find a promising article (or other information) on the Web.

- Is there an author? -- If no individual is taking responsibility for the article, watch out. Look to see what the sponsoring organization is. If the article or information is part of a reliable web site -- for example, the Mayo Clinic -- then the information may be trusted even though no author is given.

- What are the author's qualifications? -- A medical article written by an M.D. from a reliable medical research facility carries more weight than one written by someone whose credentials are unknown.

- What is the author's purpose? -- An article written by an M.D. working for a company selling health food may be more interested in selling a product than in telling the whole story. An author may have particular political or social agenda and may not be giving you an objective account.

- Is there a bibliography? -- An article with a bibliography of good sources carries more weight than an article without a bibliography, because you know who the author's sources are. On the other hand, a veterinary school may provide animal disease information for pet owners that is quite reliable but not cite sources because it is not intended for a scholarly audience. You would trust the information because it was on the web site of veterinary school.