

Evaluating Web Sites

Applying a critical eye to all of the resources you find during your research is essential, but it is particularly important when you using Web sites and Internet documents. Since no one is screening these for you, it is important that you develop the skills to evaluate what you find.

Consider the following in your evaluation:

Scope: What items are included in the resource? Is the scope stated or only implied? Does the actual scope of the resource match expectations? Aspects of scope include:

- Breadth: Are all the aspects of the subject covered?
- Depth: To what level of detail in the subject does the resource go?
- Time: Is the information in the resource limited to certain time periods?

Content: Is there substantive information provided at this site or is it made up primarily of links to other information? Is the resource an integral resource, or has it been abstracted or excerpted from another source?

- Is information in this resource available in other forms (for example other sites on the Web, in print, or in another electronic resource)? What advantages does this particular resource have?
- If the resource is derived from another format, e.g., print, does it have all of the features of the original? Have extra features been added? Does it complement another resource by providing updates?
- If the value of the site lies in its links to other resources, are the links kept up to date and made to appropriate resources?

Accuracy: Is the information accurate? You may wish to check this information against other resources, or by checking information about which you have special knowledge.

- Is the information presented as fact or opinion? Are sources of information stated?
- Are there political and ideological biases evident in the content?
- Is more than one viewpoint or opinion expressed?

Authority: Who is responsible for writing the content of the pages? (Seriously beware of Web sites that do not indicate who is responsible for the content.)

- Does the author have standing in the field? Has the author published elsewhere in this field, in either electronic or print format? Are the author's credentials listed on the site?

- Does the resource have some reputable organization or expert behind it? The URL name can often tell you something about the site. A URL is composed of the following parts: `http://<servername>.<institutional category>/<filepath>/` The server name often spells out or abbreviates the institution or organization which sponsors the page. Institutional categories include the following:

Category	Meaning
.com	commercial
.edu	university/college
.gov	government
.net	network service provider
.mil	military
.org	miscellaneous organizations

- Is the organization suitable to address the topic at hand?
- A "~" in the address usually indicates a personal web directory, rather than a part of the organization's official web site. <ex: `http://web.pdx.edu/~dorner`>

Quality of Writing: Is the text well written? While hypertext linking and multimedia are important elements of the Web, the bulk of the information content on the Web still lies in text, and quality of writing is important for the content to be communicated clearly.

Currency: How frequently is the resource updated, or is it a static resource?

- Are dates of update stated, and do these correspond to information in the resource? Remember that this may not be the date that the actual information was created or reviewed.

- Does the organization or person hosting the resource appear to have a commitment to ongoing maintenance and stability of the resource?

- Is the information still valid for your topic?

Graphic and Multimedia Design: Is the resource interesting to look at? Do the visual effects enhance the resource, distract from the content, or substitute for content? If audio, video, virtual reality modeling, etc. are used, are they appropriate to the purpose of the source?

Purpose: What is the purpose of the resource? Is this purpose stated clearly? Does the resource fulfill the stated purpose?

- Who are the intended users of this resource? At what level is the resource pitched: a subject expert, a layperson, or a student?
- Will the resource satisfy the needs of the intended users?
- The Internet has become a prime marketing and advertising tool, and it is frequently advisable to ask, “what motivation does the author have in placing this information on the Net?” Frequently the answer is that information is placed to advertise, or support a particular point of view.

Accessibility: Is the source convenient and easy to use?

- Have user interfaces been addressed, such as menu design, readability of screens, etc.?
- How effectively can information be retrieved from the resource? Is a useful search engine provided? What operators and ranking features are available? Does the search engine index the whole resource?
- Is the organizational scheme appropriate, for example chronological for an historical source, or geographical for a regional resource?
- Can the resource be accessed with standard equipment and software, or are there special software, password, or network requirements?
- Can the resource be accessed reliably or is it frequently overloaded or offline?
- Is the resource free?

Relevance: Is this site a suitable resource for your research?

- Is the information comprehensive enough for your needs?
- Is the format or medium of the information useful for your assignment?

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