



Resources for Online Learners

Evaluating the Quality of Online Information

With the help of search engines Google, you now have the vast resources of the World Wide Web at your fingertips. But how do you find the real nuggets of information among the ore samples you will mine from your searches? And how do you know the nuggets aren't fool's gold?

To answer these questions, let's look at some of the classic criteria used to evaluate traditional print information:

Authorship. Almost anyone can publish a Web page, so it's important to know the credentials of the author. Questions you should ask at this point are:

- Is the author well-known and well-regarded in your field?
- If the author is not known, is he/she mentioned in a positive way by another person you trust as an authority?
- Was the page that linked you to the resource in question developed by a respected authority?
- Does the page provide or link to biographical information, including the author's position, institutional affiliation and address?
- Is there an e-mail address, mailing address or telephone number so you can request further information on the author's work?

Publisher. Information on the Web page host or publisher is important in determining whether the information has been screened and checked for accuracy. Questions to ask include:

- Is the name of the sponsoring organization on the page or linked to the page?
- Is it an official academic or scholarly Web site? Is the organization recognized in your field?
- Is the organization qualified to address the topic being discussed?
- Can you determine the relationship of the author to the publisher? Was the page created as part of the author's professional duties? Or was it developed on a fee-for-service basis?
- Can you verify the identity of the server where the page resides?

Point of View. The Web is an ideal venue for commercial and political propaganda. That's why when you view information on the Internet, it's important to know *who* is providing the information and what his or her bias might be. Look at the URL and ask yourself if the document resides on the Web server of an organization that has a commercial, political or philosophical agenda. Are you looking at a commercial site that will inevitably present information about the company and its products in a positive light? Are you reading about a political figure on a site that is sponsored by the opposing party?

Knowledge of the Literature. This reveals the author's scholarship, i.e., what he or she does or doesn't know about the disciplines and its practices. Questions relevant at this point include:

- Does the page include a bibliography?
- Does the author cite or allude to related sources of information?
- Does the author demonstrate a knowledge of current theories, schools of thought or techniques?
- If the author presents a new theory or technique, does he or she discuss its value and/or limitations?
- Does the author acknowledge that his or her treatment of the subject is controversial?

Accuracy. Evaluating the accuracy of the information presented is especially important if the author or sponsoring organization is unfamiliar. To evaluate the accuracy of Web materials, ask:

- How was the information gathered? If a research document, what research methods were used?
- Is the methodology used appropriate for the topic? Does it allow for verification?
- Does the Web page rely on other sources listed in the bibliography or include links to the sources themselves?
- Does the Web page name individuals who provided non-published data used in the preparation of the material?
- Can the background information used to prepare the material be verified for accuracy?

Currency. Information on the Web page host or publisher is important in determining whether the information has been screened and checked for accuracy. Questions to ask include:

- Does the Web page include the date at which the information was gathered?
- Does the material refer to clearly dated information?
- Does the page include a last updated date? Does it include information on the regularity of updates?
- Is there a copyright date?
- If no date is given, can you view the directory in which the page resides and find the date of modification?

Additional Resources

Note: Whenever possible, several links have been included to provide alternative resources. Keep in mind that the sheer volume of information available through the Internet makes it impossible to include all of the relevant electronic sources for a given course. You are therefore encouraged to search out additional resources on your own using the search option of your choice.

Alexander, J. & Tate, M. (1999). *Web Wisdom*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Cooke, A. (1999). *Neal-Schuman authoritative guide to evaluating information on the Internet*. New York: Neal Schuman.

Radford, M. L, Barnes, S. B., & Barr, L. R. (2001). *Web research: selecting, evaluating, & citing*. Pearson Allyn & Bacon.

Wolinsky, A. (2000). *Locating and evaluating information on the Internet*. Springfield, NJ: Enslow Publishers, Inc.

[Critically Analyzing Information Sources](#)

[Criteria for Evaluating Internet Information Resources](#)