**Evaluating Web Sites - Five Basic Criteria**

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With its growing accessibility, the Internet has becomes a vital source for research. It is convenient to use and the information contained on the Internet is plentiful. However, not all of that information is accurate or even credible.

When using the Internet as a research tool, the user must differentiate between quality information and misinformation. Ultimately, the job of evaluating a source's credibility lies with the user. This article provides five valuable criteria for evaluating Internet sources.

**Accuracy**

The most important part of evaluating a Web site is checking the accuracy of the source and content. The foremost rule in checking accuracy is to validate the information in more than one source. The back-up source can be another Web site or a print source. Preferably, one of the sources will be published by a reputable company or knowledgeable person in the field.

If the user finds more than one source that conflicts with the research, it is best not to use that information.

To further evaluate the accuracy of a Web site, answer the following questions:

* Are the facts on the site documented? Verifiable?
* Is more than one source used for background information within the site?
* Does the site contain a bibliography?
* Are copyright laws respected?
* Is the site up-to-date?
* Are the links within the site appropriate? Are they up-to-date?
* Was any significant information omitted?
* Is an explanation of the research method given?
* Are there grammatical and spelling errors in the text?
* Is the article biased? If so, is the bias presented as fact or opinion?

Only through research can the user verify the facts and find supporting evidence to answer these questions. Remember that the Internet allows anyone to publish, so be extra careful in evaluating the information found there.

**Authority**

Two things to consider when evaluating the authority of a site are 1) the author and the text and 2) the publisher or sponsor of the site. The author should be:

* clearly identified.
* well-known in the field or recommended by someone who is well-known in the field.
* easily accessible, with an e-mail or postal address given.

**Usefulness**

One of the first things to decide is whether a site is useful, especially in cases when a search engine is used. When a keyword is searched, often thousands of hits will appear. The first step in evaluating usefulness begins with the result list. By reading the title and the description of a site provided in the list, the user will usually have a good idea if the site is worth investigating.

After selecting a site, the true evaluation of usefulness begins. When investigating a broad topic, read through all the information on the site, then answer the following questions:

* Does the site address the topic?
* Is the information about the topic comprehensive, or is it just a superficial treatment?
* Does the site contain links to other sources that address the topic?

**Currentness**

Is the information on the site current? This is not always an issue in evaluating a site. For example, information on the development of stage design in the 1800s will stay much the same whether it was printed yesterday or three years ago. However, researching a current event, such as multiculturalism in today's classroom, requires the most current information possible. When evaluating the site, take into consideration when the information was published and when the site was last updated. Also consider the currentness of the links provided on the site.

**Presentation**

Even though presentation of a site doesn't necessarily indicate the validity of its information, it does affect an evaluation of the site. The presentation of information on a site is important not only because it makes the first impression on the user, but also because it affects how easily the information can be accessed and documented. When evaluating the presentation of a Web site, consider the following questions:

* Is the information easy to access?
* Is the design appealing?
* Does the organization make sense?
* Are the sections properly labeled?

The publisher or sponsor of the page is often a good indicator of content. If a reputable reference-work publisher, such as *Encyclopedia Britannica*, produces the site it should be considered trustworthy, although the information still needs to be supported. However, if the publisher is unknown or is an individual, take extra care in checking the facts. When an organization or corporation sponsors a page, beware of bias. Often these sites are meant to persuade the user either to purchase a product or to adopt a belief. Pay special attention to the language used and the way in which it is presented.