Library HITS: Evaluating Information on the Web
Discover how to evaluate websites and information on the World Wide Web

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The quality of information found online can be extremely variable.

Anyone can post data and information on the Internet and not all online sources are equally reliable, valuable, or accurate.

Unlike most traditional information media (books, magazines, organizational documents), no one has to approve the content before it is made public.
EVALUATING INFORMATION ON THE WEB

Before using information found on the web for writing a paper or including it in your research there are a number of criteria you should consider:

Authorship

Currency / Structure

Integrity or Reliability

Verifiability

Bias / Agenda
1. Authorship

- What can the URL tell you?
  - Is the url part of a recognised publishing body or institutional website?

- Who wrote the page? Is he, she, or the authoring institution a qualified authority?
  - An author can be a person, or an organization such as a business, an educational institution, or a government agency

- Is the author a recognised person in your field?
  - What are the author’s qualifications and credentials?
  - What is the author’s position (job function, title)
  - Can the author’s credentials be verified through other sources?
  - Is there contact information for the author on the site?
  - If an institution is cited, is the name of the institution displayed on the site?
  - If you are unable to answer any of these questions, or verify the authorship then you should consider whether it is safe to use the information
URLs can provide useful clues to verify whether material is authentic.
The url for this website looks legitimate but it is the content which shows it is a spoof – it is also out of date stating that Bush is the president.
2. Currency / Structure

- Is it dated? Current, timely?
- Stability of information
  - Is the website present when you revisit it?
- How current is the material?
  - Are there any dates on the page or site?
  - When was it created?
  - When was it last updated or edited?
  - Is the information on the page kept up-to-date?
- Who is responsible for maintaining information on the website?
  - Is the responsibility that of an organisation or is there a named individual?
- Is information on the website freely available or is a subscription, registration, payment, etc. required?
- Is the site easy to navigate?
3. Integrity or Reliability

- Does the page have overall integrity and reliability as a source?
  - Is the information presented on organizational web sites?
  - Is the page part of an online journal which uses refereeing (peer review) by editors or others?
  - Is the information taken from books or journals that have a quality control process?

Things to watch out for:

Anonymity

Lack of Quality Control

Negative Meta-information. If all the reviews are critical, be careful.

Bad grammar or misspelled words, more than two or three spelling or grammar errors is cause for caution, at least. Whether the errors come from carelessness or ignorance, neither puts the information or the writer in a favourable light.
4. Verifiability

– Is the information cited authentic?
– Does it refer to other sources?
– Is the information comparable with related sources?
  • Are there cited references on the page?
  • Is there a bibliography?
  • Has the author provided their contact details so you can contact them to discuss any queries?
– If statistics are used have they been documented?
– Could the page or site be ironic, like a satire or a spoof?
– If you cannot verify the data on a webpage then it would be dangerous to rely on the validity of its data.
Sounds like a very dangerous chemical indeed. It's actually H2O, but if you're not of a scientific mind this site will get you every time.

Look for clues within the pages you use
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We work without prior restraint: You might see material we would have deleted, before we can do so. You can report to any administrator material that is offensive without a humor purpose.

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I understand and I wish to continue  I do not wish to continue

Thank you for visiting Uncyclopedia.
EXAMPLE OF A SPOOF / SATIRE SITE

HAGGIS HUNT 2012/13

HAGGIS CAMS

HAGGIS HUNT - HOME

ONLY 4 MONTHS TO GO UNTIL HAGGIS SEASON

The Haggis Hunt season has ended. Peace descends once more on the haggis moors. Our ghillie, Hector Farquharson, has slunk back to his hunting lodge with his meuran until 30 November, 2013.

Thank you for hunting with us. This Season we were kindly assisted by Highland Titles, Fairmont St Andrews and The Scotsman Publications Ltd. Our 2012/2013 Grand Prize was a one night luxury break at the Fairmont St Andrews.

Do not be too despondent at the season's close. The hunt begins again on St Andrew's Day.

Until then, why not familiarize yourself with the terrain by studying our webcams? Or maybe leaf through our haggiscyclopedia to hone your hunting skills further?

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5. Bias or Agenda

- Intended Audience – who is the page written for?
- Does the page show signs of propaganda, misinformation or disinformation?
- Is the page focusing on a point of view or bias?
- Is the information pitched to gather a financial gain for the author?
- Is there a political bias?
- Is there a hidden agenda?
- Are there indicators of a lack of reasonable argument?

Intemperate tone

Over-claims

Sweeping statements of excessive significance

Conflict of Interest e.g. the tobacco industry writing an article on the slimming benefits of smoking

Be careful of only looking for sources whose ideas, findings, or arguments fit what your argument, you must have balance

- you should be open to opposing ideas and not discount them just because you don’t like them or because they conflict with your planned direction.
Always document your site with a URL address, organizational affiliation, the date you viewed it, and other identifying information.

Here are some places to go online that explain how to cite electronic information sources using the most common citation styles.

APA Reference List: Electronic Sources from the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL)
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/10/

The Chicago Manual of Style: Web Sources from the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL)
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/717/05/

CSE Quick Citation Guide from Penn State University Libraries, Library Learning Services
http://www.libraries.psu.edu/psul/lls/students/cse_citation.html

Introduction to Basic Legal Citation: How to Cite Electronic Sources by Peter W. Martin, Legal Information Institute (LII), Cornell University Law School
http://www.law.cornell.edu/citation/

ipl2’s Style and Writing Guide Section
Resources by Subject > Reference > Style and Writing Guides

MLA Works Cited: Electronic Sources (Web Publications) from the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL)
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/08/

Quick Guide: ACS Citation Style from Penn State University Libraries, Library Learning Services
http://www.libraries.psu.edu/content/dam/psul/up/pams/documents/QuickGuideACS.pdf
A wiki is a publishing platform on which many people can contribute new content and revise existing content. The content benefits from the collective knowledge base and the dynamic nature of the contributions.

Examples: [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org), [wikiHow](https://www.wikihow.com), [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org)

To evaluate the content on a wiki, look for these clues:

- The sponsorship of the wiki. This may be explained on an "About" or similar page.
- The wiki, whether academic or popular, suits your needs.
- The identity of those who are able to edit or add content. If it is a select group, try to determine if they have expertise in the wiki’s topic.
- Changes to the page appear reasonable.
- The material you are interested in cites sources that you can use to double-check the information.
- There are guidelines for contributors to follow.
- There is monitoring of content by those responsible for the wiki, and you can determine who these authors are (often you can’t).
- The currency of the edits. Some wiki platforms offer a "History" or similar tab that allows you to view a sequential list of changes.
When you're doing academic research, you should be extremely cautious about using Wikipedia. As its own disclaimer states, information on Wikipedia is contributed by anyone who wants to post material.

Users may be reading information that is outdated or that has been posted by someone who is not an expert in the field or by someone who wishes to provide misinformation.

Some information on Wikipedia may well be accurate, but because experts do not review the site's entries, there is a considerable risk in relying on this source for your essays.
In March 2009, Irish student Shane Fitzgerald, who was conducting research on the Internet and globalization of information, posted a fake quotation on the Wikipedia article about recently deceased French composer Maurice Jarre. Due to the fact that the quote was not attributed to a reliable source, it was removed several times by editors, but Fitzgerald continued re-posting it until it was allowed to remain.

Fitzgerald was startled to learn that several major newspapers picked up the quote and published it in obituaries, confirming his suspicions of the questionable ways in which journalists use Web sites, and Wikipedia, as a reliable source. Fitzgerald e-mailed the newspapers letting them know that the quote was fabricated; he believes that otherwise, they might never have found out.
In UCLA's Daily Bruin, we learn:

Many educators agree ... that Wikipedia is a valuable place to start research, but **should not be treated as an authoritative source.**

The history department at Middlebury College in Vermont **announced a policy last week forbidding students from citing Wikipedia articles in research papers,** said Middlebury history Professor Neil Waters. The policy states that "Wikipedia is not an acceptable citation, even though it may lead one to a citable source."

And **what does Wikipedia's OWN COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER SAY?**

"Wikipedia is a great resource for students to get a good overview of a topic, but it **should not be cited in papers or exams since it is not an authoritative source,**" said Sandy Ordonez, communications manager for Wikipedia.
Blogs—an abbreviation of “weblogs”—are websites or areas of websites devoted to dated reflections by the site’s author. Many blogs are hosted on or presented as private websites where the author claims little special expertise or no professional affiliation relevant to the blog’s topic. In these cases use care when evaluating the material you access.

Blogs are increasingly included in the academic framework and can be found as a feature of organization websites, or from individual academics. Blogs should not be viewed as the same authority as a peer reviewed article but can be used to add insight into an area in a more casual format.

Be extra vigilant of bias with blogs as they are coming from a singular point of view in many cases.
To evaluate the content on a blog, look for these clues:

Most blog postings focus on a discussion of issues rather than day-to-day personal or recreational activities.

Blog postings are signed by an identifiable author.

The author has expertise on the topic of the blog.

Comments on blog postings emphasize substantive discussion of the issues.

Blog postings are cited on other blogs. A blog search engine such as Technorati can help to determine this, and general search engines are also useful.

Links to the blog or its individual postings are saved on social bookmarking sites.

New blog postings appear fairly regularly – though archived blogs can contain useful material.
Document repositories store copies of scholarly and research materials that are available for public use. They are usually maintained by academic institutions, libraries, publishers, or organizations. Some of these repositories post papers before or after their publication in scholarly journals, and different versions of papers may appear. Repositories may contain text, data, presentations, and multimedia materials.

Trinity’s Repository is called TARA.

Examples: arXiv.org, California Digital Library, RePEc: Research Papers in Economics
To evaluate the content in a document repository, look for these clues:

The repository is sponsored by a reputable academic institution, library, publisher, or organization e.g. Trinity’s TARA

The repository is searchable in OAIster, a reputable union catalog of academic-oriented digital resources.

The author has expertise on the topic. This will apply to more recent, as opposed to historical, documents.

If the document in question is an article, it has been published in a reputable journal. The identity of the "official" publication in a journal can help determine the copy of record for the publication.

The material you are interested in cites sources that you can use to verify the information
There are many electronic forums that allow users with a specific interest or affiliation to discuss topics with each other. Some of these are restricted to members of a group, or of a specific course. Other such discussions are open to any interested party. Although discussions limited to professionals in a field may be more authoritative, in general you should probably treat material from these forums as popular rather than scholarly sources.

Consider these factors when evaluating this content:

The identity of the source of shared information can be verified.

Information on the forum, listserv, chat room or bulletin board pages can be verified.

The individual contributing information has expertise on the topic.

Note: Many such forums expect communications to be private. Be sure to check the group’s policies on reproduction of such material. Even if an FAQ or moderator seems to make reproduction permissible, a decent respect for privacy suggests that you secure the poster’s permission before making the material public.
Social networking sites are online communities in which members can interact in a number of ways. Full-featured communities offer the ability to share a personal profile, initiate contacts with “friends,” form groups of members with similar interests, contact group members directly, engage in discussions, share media or photos, and discover other common connections through one’s contacts. Some social networking sites allow members to create interactive software that functions within the community. Others allow institutions or companies to maintain profiles or pages. The sites may be focused on a specialized interest or may be more general in nature. While social networking sites are often used for recreation, they can also serve as a means of communicating about academic or professional interests.

Examples: Facebook, MySpace, Ning, TripAdvisor, Twitter
To evaluate the content on a social networking site, look for these clues:

The identity of the source of shared information can be verified. This can be done by examining the profile page if made public, verifying the named source of the information, and so on.

Information on the profile page of the individual, institution, company, or library can be verified.

The individual, institution, etc. contributing information has expertise on the topic.

Information picked up in a social network receives favourable comments, can be externally verified, or meets you needs.

The institutions or companies offering community-based applications can be identified. You can also check for reviews of the application or see if any of your “friends” are using it.
Twitter and Facebook continues to gain momentum as a social phenomenon, problems arise when citing this material as it often is not accessible after a certain time and therefore you need to “capture the moment”.

Evaluating this quality of this information can be difficult. Once again try to verify or evaluate facts relating to the tweet or post and look for the following information:

- Author and/or editor names (if available)
- Article name
- Title of the Website, project, or book in italics.
- Any version numbers available, including revisions, posting dates, volumes, or issue numbers.
- Publisher information, including the publisher name and publishing date.
Before using any information on the web in your academic papers always remember to look at:

**Authorship**

**Currency / Structure**

**Integrity or Reliability**

**Verifiability**

**Bias / Agenda**
The Library of Trinity College Dublin, The University of Dublin

Leabharlann Choláiste na Tríonóide, Ollscoil Átha Cliath

Thank You!