**Evaluating Web Information**

[Author](http://www.lib.unca.edu/library/lr/evalweb.html#author)[Publisher or Sponsor](http://www.lib.unca.edu/library/lr/evalweb.html#publisher)[URL](http://www.lib.unca.edu/library/lr/evalweb.html#url)[Point of View/Bias](http://www.lib.unca.edu/library/lr/evalweb.html#bias)[Accuracy and Reliability](http://www.lib.unca.edu/library/lr/evalweb.html#accuracy)[Currency](http://www.lib.unca.edu/library/lr/evalweb.html#currency)

**Why evaluate information found on the Web?**

**The web lacks formal organization.**

* Tons of information is dumped into cyberspace every day without anyone being responsible for organizing it in a user-friendly fashion.  It's not always easy to find specific information on a topic because the web lacks formal structure.

**There's little or no quality control on the Internet**.

* **Practically anyone can upload a home page or web site**, allowing contributors a level of anonymity -- and with it, the potential for great irresponsibility found in few other media.

It’s easy to access web pages in which persons with unclear qualifications seem to speak with authority on complex topics, about which they may in truth have no real knowledge or expertise*.*

Just as its name indicates, the World Wide Web contains colossal networks of information that vary in quality and credibility. Many commercial websites don't provide author or publisher credentials, or don't include enough information to verify the content or currency of the site.

**While abundant websites provide reliable consumer information, many other sites contain untrustworthy, incorrect or misleading information. It's your responsibility to develop the skills necessary to critically evaluate the quality and trustworthiness of the information you find on the web.**

Consider the following **criteria** that can be used to help you with your critical evaluation process:

**Author**

Anyone with access to a server can publish anything on the web. It's important to identify the author of a web document and verify his or her qualifications to write on the topic. Ask yourself the following questions about authorship:

* Is there an author listed? Is the document signed?
* Is there any way of getting more information about the author from this site?
* Are the author's credentials provided? Is he or she qualified to write on this subject?
* Is contact information provided for the author? Or, is contact information provided for the institution or company with which the author is associated in order to determine the author's qualifications?

**Remember to look for a physical address and phone number – a simple email address is not sufficient if you need to contact someone to verify information.**

**Tips to determine the credentials of an author:**

* Go to the home page of the website that contains the document and search for the author’s name and his or her affiliation with the site.
* Try to find pages about or by the same author by performing a [Google](http://www.google.com) search on the author’s name.

If a document lists no obvious author, you must carefully examine the publisher, institution or organization responsible for sponsoring the document's website.

**Publisher or Sponsor**

It's essential to identify and evaluate the credentials and motivations of the organization or people responsible for maintaining a website. Ask yourself the following questions about the website’s publisher or sponsoring agency:

* Does the site clearly identify the organization responsible for publishing the information found on it?
* Is there a link at the top or bottom of the page linking back to information about the website’s publisher or sponsor?  **NOTE:** You can often find such info from an "About Us" or "Frequently Asked Questions" link.
* From examining the website’s [URL](http://www.lib.unca.edu/library/lr/evalweb.html#url), can you determine if the page is part of someone’s personal account or part of an official site?
**NOTE:** A tilde (~) in the URL usually indicates a personal web page rather than an institutional website.
* Can you find the sponsoring organization’s homepage by deleting all the information in the URL **after** the website’s domain name?
For example, www.unca.edu/students/current/ is the UNCA Current Students resource page. The University of North Carolina – Asheville homepage is www.unca.edu/.
* Can you determine if the information has been published elsewhere, such as in a scholarly journal?
* Does the document have consistent headers or wallpaper that imply an association with a larger website?

**Inspect the URL**

By examining a website’s URL (uniform resource locator, commonly called its web address), you can learn more about the type of website you're exploring and where the information comes from. Components of a URL include:

* **Host Computer**: the host computer server where a website is located, usually follows the “www.” This information is important for determining where the web page originates:
For example http://www.unca.edu/lit/ is the UNCA Department of Literature and Language homepage – unca is the campus server.
* **Domain Name**: the final few letters that follow the host computer name. Some common domains include:
**.edu** - educational institution (ranges from legitimate university research to
       personal student pages)
**.net** - network provider (usually provides services to subscribing customers,
       such as EarthLink)
**.gov** - government agency (usually official government information)
**.org** - non-profit organization (often like-minded individuals working for a
       common cause, may promote a specific point of view)
**.com** - commercial enterprise (usually trying to sell or endorse products)
* **Directory Path**: the directory in which the file is located, usually followed by a forward slash (i.e. http://www.unca.edu/lit/).

**Point of View/Bias**

Information doesn't occur in a vacuum, so it's rarely neutral. It's important to identify any biases and determine whether or not a one-sided point of view may influence your decision to use the information contained within the document. Ask yourself the following questions about bias:

* What's the author’s point of view? Is this point of view clearly stated by the author or editor?
* Is the document trying to influence your opinion?
* Is this a commercial site? Is the purpose of the site to promote or sell any products?
* Does the document come from a server sponsored by an organization with a specific agenda (political, commercial or philosophical)?
* If the information refers to controversial issues, does the author acknowledge such a controversy?

A web document with an obvious bias doesn't necessarily imply that the information it contains is without value. Various sources of information are appropriate for use in different research situations. It's your responsibility to determine whether or not such subjective information will match your research needs.

**Accuracy and Reliability**

Editors and publishers don't necessarily examine and evaluate the content of web sites. The information contained within a web document must be carefully scrutinized for errors and misleading statements. Ask yourself the following questions about accuracy and reliability:

* Is there a way to verify any background information provided in the document?
* Does the document contain any spelling or grammar errors?
* If the document quotes or refers to other sources, does it include a bibliography or link to the original source documents mentioned?
* If you're looking at a research article, is the source of the information clearly identified? Does the article include the gathered data and explain the research methods used to gather and interpret it?
* Does the document contain any broken links?

**Currency**

Once a web document is placed on a server, it will remain there until it is either removed or the server is turned off. Information available on the web is not guaranteed to be up to date. Ask yourself the following questions about currency:

* Determine if currency is important to your topic (does your research involve recent events, or is it historical?). If currency is important, can you establish how up to date the information source may be?
* Is the page dated? Is it regularly maintained and updated?

**If dates aren't provided, look for clues about currency within the document:**

* Are there references to dated information (i.e. 2000 Election Results)?
* Do the sources used in the document's bibliography or references provide any dates or clues?
* Does the document refer to current news events?
* Are all the links current, or are any of them broken (changed or moved)?

**About Intellectual Property / Copyright**

Although no one person, group or corporation owns or controls the web, the same cannot be said for specific information resources available through it.**Copyright laws that protect intellectual property in the print publishing world also protect intellectual property in the virtual realm.**

* **Most text and images that you find on the web are copyrighted**. You'll need to seek permission from the website copyright holder (author, publisher or sponsoring agency) if you plan to use copyrighted material in a presentation or web page of your own.
* To avoid **plagiarism** (the use of someone's words or ideas as your own) when writing a research paper, cite all sources that you use from the web, just as you would from a printed book or article.