EVALUATING WEB SITES

It is essential to know how to evaluate Web sites for the same reasons you would evaluate a periodical article or a book: to determine whether you can rely on the information, to identify biases or limitations, and to see how or whether it fits into the parameters of your assignment and your overall research strategy.

A good (reliable, useful) Web site:

1. **Clearly states the author and/or organizational source of the information.** This information is often given in a section labeled “About.” If you’ve arrived in the middle of a web site, you may need to make your way to the main page of the author/sponsor to find this information.

   Your task:
   - Be persistent. It may take some detective work to find information identifying the author/sponsor of the site.
   - Consider the qualifications and organizational affiliation of the author
   - Look up the organization which produced the Web site (if it’s unfamiliar) to identify its credentials, viewpoint, or agenda
   - If the source is an E-journal, discover whether it is refereed (reviewed by scholars) before it is accepted for publication.

2. **Clearly states the date the material was written and the date the site was last revised**

   Your task:
   - If the information is not current enough for your purposes, look elsewhere
   - If the date is not given, are there any other indications that the material is kept current? Find out whether your instructor is willing allow use of information from an undated site.

3. **Provides accurate data**

   Your task:
   - Compare the data found on the Web site with data found in other sources (encyclopedias, reference books, periodical articles, etc.) for accuracy, completeness, currency
   - Is the information free of grammatical, spelling, and other typographical errors? (These kinds of errors not only indicate a lack of quality control, but can actually produce inaccuracies in information).
4. Keeps **bias to a minimum and/or clearly indicates point of view**

Your task:
- Be aware that producing a Web page does not require the checking and review that publishing a scholarly book or periodical article requires; the site may represent someone’s personal opinion on a topic—not the consensus of the scholarly community
- Watch for bias. It is okay to use information from a web site that is promoting a particular point of view as long as you are **aware** of that point of view
- Many commercial sites provide information as a “public service.” Is that information kept separate from advertising for the site’s product?

5. **Provides the type and level of information you need**

Your task:
- Decide whether the level of detail and comprehensiveness, the treatment of the topic (e.g., scholarly or popular), and the graphics or other features are acceptable
- If the site does not provide the depth of coverage you need, look elsewhere. Ask the reference librarians for suggestions.

6. **Is clearly organized and designed for ease of use**

Your task:
- Move around the page to see if its organization makes sense and is easy to return to the top or to the sections you need
- Decide whether the graphics enhance the content or detract from it
- Determine whether you can print needed information (if not, consider copying and pasting to Word, WordPad, or other word processing software—along with the information required for your footnotes or list of works cited!)

7. **Provides live links to related high quality Web sites**

Your task:
- Click on several of the links provided to see if they are active (or if they give an "error" message indicating the links are not being maintained) and to see if they are useful
- Check to see if the criteria are stated for selecting the links

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