

EVALUATING INFORMATION FOUND ON THE INTERNET

Five Simple Criteria for Evaluating a Web Site

1. Authority
2. Purpose
3. How Current is it?
4. Objectivity v. Bias
5. Support/Documentation

On this tip sheet, "web pages" means the "free web" -- web sites anyone can access -- not our web-based research tools like online databases and e-journals that Doherty library provides for UST students and faculty.



1. Authority

Who wrote the page?

Is it easy to tell? Look for the author's name near the top or the bottom of the page. If you can't find a name, look for a copyright credit (©) or link to an organization.

What are the author's credentials? Can you verify them?

Look for biographical information or the author's affiliations (university department, organization, corporate title, etc.).

Keep in mind that credentials could be made up - Anyone who has visited a chat room knows that people don't always identify themselves accurately.

Did the author include contact information?

Look for an email link, address, or phone number for the author. A responsible author should give you the means to contact him/her.

Whose web site is this?

What organization is sponsoring the web page?

Look at the domain (.com, .edu, .org, etc.). Is it commercial, non-profit or government?

Look for an "about this site" link.

A tilde (~) in the URL usually identifies a personal directory on a web site.

Internet service provider sites (AOL, MSN, etc.) and online community sites (GeoCities, Angelfire, etc.) feature personal pages. Be careful of web pages from those sites.

2. Purpose



What is the purpose of the page? Why did the author create it?

The purpose could be advertising, advocacy, news, entertainment, opinion, fandom, scholarship, satire, etc.

Some pages have more than one purpose. For example, <http://dowjones.wsj.com/> provides free business information but also encourages you to subscribe to the Wall Street Journal or other Dow Jones products.

Who is the target audience?

academic researchers? kids? buyers of competitors' products? trekkers? political extremists?

Look at reading level of the page: is it easy to read or challenging? Does it assume previous knowledge of the subject?

Consider the design of the web page: are there banner ads and animated GIF's, or does the page present a lot of text with little decoration?



3. Is the information Current?

Is there a date at the top or bottom of the page?

But note: a recent date doesn't necessarily mean the information is current. The **content** might be years out of date even if the given date is recent. (The last update of the page might have consisted of someone changing an email address or fixing a typo.)

Is the information up-to-date?

This takes a little more time to determine. **Compare** the information on the web page to information available through other sources. Broken links are one measure of an out-of-date page.

In general, information for science, technology, and business ages quickly. Information in the humanities and social sciences ages less quickly. However, old information can still be perfectly valid.

4. Objectivity v. Bias



Is the author being objective or biased?

Biased information is not necessarily "bad", but you must take the bias into account when interpreting or using the information given.

Look at the facts the author provides, and the facts the author *doesn't* provide.

Are the facts accurately and completely cited?

Is the author fair, balanced, and moderate in his or her views, or is the author overly emotional or extreme?

Based on the author's authority, try to identify any conflict of interest.

Determine if the **advertising** is clearly separated from the **objective** information on the page.



5. Support / Documentation

Does the author support the information he or she uses?

Good academic web pages include bibliographies - Look for documentation; look for links or citations to sources.

Is the support respectable?

Does the page cite well-known sources or authorities? Does the page cite a variety of sources?

Do other pages on the same topic cite some of the same sources? The web page in question should have a mix of internal links (links to web pages on the same site or by the same author) and external links (links to other sources or experts).

And Lastly,

Is the Web the right place to find the type of information you're looking for?

Sometimes, the Internet is just the right place to find useful info, other times it's not. Some kinds of information are not available on the free web. Also, some kinds of information are just easier to find using library resources. Examples: Literary criticism, scholarly journal articles, objective business/company information, certain kinds of statistical data, market research and public opinion polls. Learn to use the right tool for the job.