

What to Look for: Checklist and Tricks for Evaluating Web Pages

1. What can the URL tell you?

- a. **What type of domain** does it come from (educational, non-profit, commercial, etc.)? Is it appropriate for the content?
Government sites: look for .gov, .mil, .us, or other country code
Educational sites: look for .edu or another country code
Non-profit organizations: look for .org or some other country code
- b. **Who "published" the page?**
In general, the publisher is the agency or person operating the "server" computer from which the document is issued. The server is usually named in first portion of the URL (between http:// and the first /).
- c. **Is it somebody's personal page?**
Read the URL carefully: Is the server a commercial ISP or other provider of web page hosting (like aol.com or geocities.com)? Look for a personal name (e.g., jbarker or barker) following a tilde (~) or the word "users" or "people."

2. Who wrote the page? Is he, she, or the authoring institution a qualified authority?

- a. **Look for a name and e-mail.**
Often at the bottom of the page, or in a section called something like "About us" or "Contact us." It is usually not the same person as the "webmaster" or page designer (except in personal pages). This person is a technician or may have been hired to put the content on the web.
- b. **Are the author's credentials provided?**
Does this person seem to be a reliable authority on the subject? Look all over (top, bottom, side bars, etc.) for a link to an "About us" or "Biography" section, a "Philosophy," etc.? If there's no such section, learn what you can by truncating elements of the URL.

3. Is it dated? Current, timely?

- a. **When was the page last updated? Can you tell how much was updated? Is this important for the timeliness of what you want to know?**
You can usually look at bottom of the page. Individual pages may be updated at different times; look at more than one. Look at Explorer's "Properties" (right click in the page; look under Properties/Created/Modified). If this is out of date, be suspicious of a stale page. If current, be suspicious that the date was changed but nothing else. Look at other pages from this site: You may learn something by truncating back the URL and viewing "parent" or related pages (procedure above). Not all pages are updated at the same time.
- b. **Is the date appropriate for the content? Is it "stale" or "dusty" information on a time-sensitive or evolving topic?** CAUTION: Undated factual or statistical information is no better than anonymous information.

4. Is information cited authentic?

- a. **If the page claims to be from an established newspaper, journal, organization, institution, agency, is it the real one?**
Check if the domain name corresponds to the source.
- b. **Is it unmodified if it purports to be a reproduction, facsimile, or excerpt of a published piece?**

c. Is the source of factual or attributed information well documented?

Unless a known, reputable publisher or institution vouches for the content, your research should mandate that sources and claims be substantiated by links to reliable sources or references. Again, CAUTION: Standards for footnoting and citing where people obtained information (and when) are very lax on the Web, much less exacting than in most print publications.

5. Does the page have overall integrity and reliability as a source?

a. What's the purpose of the page? Why was it created?

Inform? Explain? Facts or data? Persuade, promote? Sell? Share? Rant? Entice?

b. Who else links to the page? Where is it "cited"? What do they think of its quality and integrity?

Look for awards (or links to an "Awards" page) from reputable directories and guides. Click on these and see what they say. Do not take the award at face value without checking it out. Use a search engine like Google or AltaVista to see who links to the page. Then visit some of those sites to see what they say about the page in question.

6. What's the bias?

a. Who sponsors the page? Might the sponsors have a vested interest in the viewpoint presented?

Look for links to "sponsors," "About us," "Philosophy," etc. Advertisers can also be sponsors. Could the points of view be bent to keep or attract advertisers?

b. Are there links to other viewpoints? Balanced? Annotated?

c. Anything not said that could be said

Try to think of alternative viewpoints, and ask if they are represented or linked to.

d. Look for your own bias:

Are you being completely fair? Too harsh? Totally objective? Requiring the same degree of "proof" you would from a print publication? Is the site good for some things and not for others? Are your hopes biasing your interpretation?

7. Could the page or site be ironic, like a satire or a spoof?

Think about the "tone" of the page. Humorous? Parody? Exaggerated? Overblown arguments?

Outrageous photographs? Does it argue a viewpoint with examples that suggest that what is argued is ultimately not possible?

8. If you have questions or reservations, how can you satisfy them?

a. E-mail the author or publisher and ask for more background.

b. Consult a print publication, perhaps in the Library.

c. Ask for advice at a library reference desk or talk to your instructor.