

RESEARCH CONCEPTS & PRACTICE

Evaluating Web Information

DID YOU KNOW?

- Anyone can publish anything on the Web
- There are no editors making sure information published on the Web is accurate
- It is up to you to evaluate anything & everything you find on the Web

Locating relevant information is only one facet of Web research...the easy part. Once you find information answering your research questions, it is essential you ensure this information is accurate and authoritative before incorporating it into your work. This evaluation process is very important, as the quality of information available on the Web varies wildly.

The ABCs of Web Page Evaluation

The ABCs of Web Page Evaluation provide an easy-to-remember set of quick criteria to apply to any and all information you come across on the Web.

Accuracy/Authority (relevant expertise)

Who provided this information and what is their relevant expertise? Is there an individual author listed, or is the information coming from an organization? For individuals: can you identify and verify their education and experience? Is it relevant to the topic at hand? For organizations: who are they? Are they a well-known organization with a strong reputation? What do others say about them? How long have they been around? Who is on their staff/Board of Directors? Who writes their content? Good choices for authority include academic sites (though avoid student work) and government-sponsored sites.

Bias (point of view)

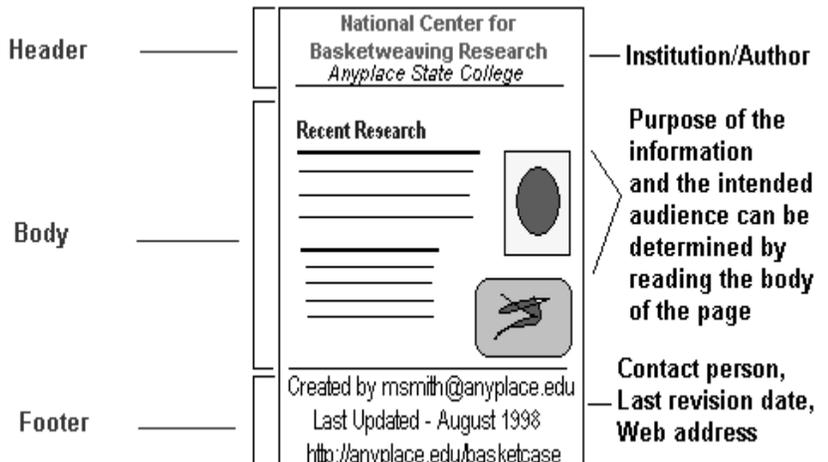
What is the purpose of this web site? Is it designed to present factual information as a public service, or is its purpose to persuade readers to adopt/support a particular viewpoint? Does it exist to make a profit? Researchers can use biased information as long as they proceed with caution. Put biased information into context ("According to the National Rifle Association, gun control fails in its fundamental purpose.") and be sure to double-check statistics and "facts" from biased sights against reliable, non-biased sources.

Currency (time-frame)

Is the material current enough to support your research topic? Is it current enough for your specific research question?

Learning Your ABCs

You will need to review the Web document carefully in order to determine authority, bias, and currency. Start by examining the header, body, and footer of the document. Depending on the document, you may have to find the home page of the sponsoring institution in order to answer the questions fully. You can also "Google" organizations to learn more about them from outside sources. More tips for web evaluation are on listed on the back of this page.



Questions for Web Evaluation

1. From which domain does this document originate?

.edu Educational. Often created to inform or explain. Sometimes students & faculty are allocated web space for publication; not all information is backed by the sponsoring institution.

.gov U.S government. Government sponsored information is usually created to inform. Some issues can involve bias; use common sense.

.org Not-for-profit organization. Organizations exist both to inform (American Cancer Society) and to persuade (National Rifle Association).

.com Commercial. Be prepared for lots of ads \$ banners. Purpose is usually to make money, so be wary.

2. Who is the author? Is an individual credited, or does the document come from an organization?

3. What is the author’s authority? Is there an author bio? Can you learn about the organization? What credentials give them the authority to provide information on your topic? Some questions to ask are:

Individuals: Related educational and/or professional experience? Have they published material and/or made conference presentations on this topic? Is there a general consensus they are experts? What do other people and/or Web pages have to say about them?*

Entities: What is the purpose of this organization? Its longevity, funding sources, key players? What do other people and/or Web pages have to say about them?*

**If you can’t determine the author’s authority by examining the Web page, you may need to look him/her up on a search engine to get more information.*

4. Are the sources well-documented? Are charts and graphs clearly labeled? Are there footnotes, endnotes, or other bibliographic information?

5. Is the information biased? Is the purpose of this Web document/site to inform, explain, persuade or sell? Go back to the authority question...who are these people? What do they want you to believe or buy?

6. When was the information you want to use written? If you can’t determine this, can you figure out when the site was last updated? If all else fails...is there even a copyright date?

1. Look at the URL	
What is the domain? .com .edu .gov .org .mil, etc.	
2. Authority	
Who produced the information? Name of person or entity.	
Describe expertise on the subject. Person: describe education, experience, etc. Entity: describe purpose, longevity, funding, staff, etc. HINT: Look for an “About Us” or “Who We Are” link.	
Are sources well documented? Footnotes, endnotes, are graphs/charts labeled?	
3. Bias	
Does this site seem to have a particular point of view? HINT: How do they describe themselves in the “About Us” link; do they use “loaded” or inflammatory language?	
4. Currency	
When was the information written / updated?	

Citing Web Documents in MLA Format

Basic Considerations

1. If the document you find on the Web is a book, a report, or a newspaper/ magazine/ journal article, cite it as such in NoodleTools. This is the TYPE of source you are citing.
2. After selecting the format of information, choose the “Web” tab. This is WHERE you found your source.
3. Remember two of your goals are to:
 - a. ensure your reader can locate your source
 - b. communicate the document’s authority
4. Be consistent, especially with the way you handle content created exclusively for the Web. I also often call these “nested” Web documents.

Content Created Exclusively for the Web aka: “Nested” Web Page Documents

It is visually evident that this information is part of a larger Web site. See:
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html> for a good example

Last, First. “Title of Specific Page.” *Title of the Entire Web Site*. Sponsoring Institution/Agency,
date. Web. Retrieval Date.

Example:

“Data and Statistics.” *Autism and Spectrum Disorders (ASDs)*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,
29 Mar. 2012. Web. 14 Nov. 2013.

Content created independently, then uploaded on the Web as a public service. aka: Stand Alone Documents

Often in PDF format, these are documents that have been published independently of any Web site, then later linked to a Web site as a public service. See:
http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/docs/understanding_cafos_nalboh.pdf for a good example.

Last, First. *Title of Document*. Sponsoring Institution/Agency, date. Web. Retrieval Date.

Example:

Hrirbar, Carrie. *Understanding Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations and Their Impact on Communities*.
National Association of Local Boards of Health, 2010. Web. 14 Nov. 2013.