Evaluating Sources

There is an old saying that you can't believe everything you read; in the 21st century we might update it to add: and especially what you read on the Internet.

While it is necessary to evaluate all sources used in a research paper, there are reasons why Internet sources must be even more rigorously scrutinized. Major differences exist between print sources and college databases on one hand, and Internet sites and Web pages on the other. These differences are important to researchers.

WHY is it especially important to evaluate Internet sources?

- **ANYONE** can “publish” information on the Internet, from grade school students to fanatics and hate groups. It is far easier to publish a Web page than to publish a book or article. All people need is an Internet account in order to publish their views to a global audience.

- Unlike traditional print resources and periodical databases, Web pages rarely have editors and are not usually peer-reviewed. Most scholarly books and articles have editors, and many are peer-reviewed as well. Writing and publishing on the Web can involve just a single person, with no other input or oversight.

- No standards exist to ensure accuracy on the World Wide Web. There is no single place set aside on the Web where people can object to the content of a Web site. Except for a few scholarly sites, have you ever seen a link to a page with opposing views to those stated by the writers?

- Many Web pages are filled with **subjective** information, that is, personal opinions and views. This type of information is the opposite of **objective** information, and you must carefully examine it before using it in a research project.

What does all this mean to you, and why should you care?

- It means that you have to be a responsible reader, especially when dealing with Internet sources.
- You should care because the single most important feature of a research paper is the quality of the research, and you want the best quality information.
Checklist For Evaluating Information Sources

Authority

• Is the author or organization credited on the document?
• Are the author’s credentials listed—education, affiliations, other writings?
• Is contact information clearly provided?
• Is the author or publisher affiliated with or sponsored by a known publishing house, university, business, or other organization?
• What does the URL tell us?
• Is the site maintained? Are the links viable? Are there spelling and grammatical errors?

Bias/Balance

• Can you detect any political, philosophical, religious or other bias in the information?
• Are opposing or differing viewpoints presented to balance the information, or is there only a single point of view?
• If it is a position page that advocates a certain idea, does the author clearly state his or her agenda?
• Is the information supported with a Works Cited page and/or footnotes?

Audience/Scope

• Does the site contain sufficient depth of information to cover the topic?
• Who is the audience for the information? Is it written for children, for specialists, for the general public? Sites written for grade school audiences are not suitable for college research papers.
• Does the site link to other quality sites on the same subject?
Purpose

• Is the book, article, or site meant to inform, persuade or sell a product?
• Is it clearly an editorial or opinion article? If so, does the author offer evidence for his or her claims?
• Are the goals or aims of the site clearly stated? Is there a link with a sponsoring organization or group, giving their stated agenda?
• Is the information applicable to your thesis topic?

Currency

• Is the date the page was created, written or updated clearly shown?
• Is the information current enough to use?
What to look for on a Web page:

- **About us** – this should take you to the mission statement (purpose) and people involved in the organization.

- **Contact us** – this should link to more than an email address; there should be a street address and phone number to contact, especially if it is an organization.

- **Site map** – this link ought to show how the site is organized.

- **Date** – the date of the last update to the page is usually at the bottom. Beware the undated page!

- **Other links** – does the site link to other trustworthy sites? Personal Web pages? Unknown groups?

It is important that you become a knowledge consumer of information and know how to determine if the information is useful and appropriate to your research/information needs. By using the criteria above and understanding what to look for, especially when it comes to web pages you will be able to do this and begin to evaluate information more critically.