Judging Website Safety

The cost of putting content online is so low that almost anyone who can afford a computer and Internet access can do it. Since there is no "Internet police" or "Internet laws" to require honest, accurate and safe practices online, some people can (and do) create sites that are harmful, inaccurate and even intentionally misleading.

Websites do not announce their honesty or dishonesty—you must use a healthy dose of suspicion, and look for your own clues. Then, use your informed judgement to evaluate the websites your visit.

Authenticity

How cautious are you about what you see and read on the Internet? Do you think you could be fooled by information you find online? The truth is that many people are tricked by convincing stories, clever schemes and exciting offers. For example, con artists offer coupons and gift cards on sites like Facebook that appear to be from reputable businesses like Ikea, Wal-Mart and Costco. Many people click and share links like these, only to find their accounts have been hacked

Links that you receive in email, text messages and Facebook posts can be attempts at **phishing** for your private information. Phishing is a common way scammers obtain personal information from unsuspecting people. They send out messages to as many addresses as they can find, expecting to get personal information from gullible or careless people who click the links, like fish nibbling at a hook. The scammers can use the information they collect (e.g., usernames, passwords, credit card numbers) to steal bank account information. Phishing can also be part of identity theft. It can be difficult to tell the difference between a phishing message and one that is safe and from a trusted course [*Click here*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8lWLwuiDwk) to watch a video on how to identify and protect yourself against phishing.

*Click the following links to learn about other types of unreliable Internet content:*

* [**A woman pretends to have cancer, and tricks kind donors out of money**](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/cancer-faker-kirilow-spared-jail-1.1029979)

Your challenge is to ensure that the websites you visit and the information you access are authentic

How to Make Sure a Web Site Is Really Authentic

1. Look for consistency in design. Your first line of defense is a critique of the flow and “readability” of the website. Ask yourself if images and text are arranged in a way that is easy to follow. Legitimate websites most often do not look as if they have been hastily thrown together. A website worth its weight will employ established rules of design with text, images and navigation.

2. Make note of careless mistakes in grammar and spelling—they are red flags. Legitimate websites expend the necessary resources to have copy proofread and edited by professionals.

3. Research websites that claim to be businesses before you perform transactions or provide information. The Better Business Bureau is a good place to start. Using your design critique, look to see if shopping carts or other transaction areas follow the general website aesthetic. Does the business have a physical mailing address other than a post office box? Is there a phone number listed? If so, call the number and ask about a particular product.

4.Be wary of distance-learning education websites. Online courses are becoming more popular every day. It’s helpful to verify that an institution is accredited before you register for classes or make tuition payments. Schools in the United States, for instance, must be accredited by the Department of Education in order to be accepted by other accredited programs or used toward a degree. Reputable online institutions of learning will list a working phone number. Call the school and request accreditation information.

5. Be absolutely sure a website is trustworthy before you enter any private information, including passwords. Hypertext transfer protocol secure (HTTPS) indicates a type of network security protocol. The “s” in “https” literally stands for “secure.” Banks and other financial institutions will display this prefix in the web address field on pages that require you to enter private information. You may also see a padlock icon in the status bar at the bottom of your browser. As a general rule, never enter private information unless “https” precedes the web URL.

6.If you are still unsure, or simply want to take a preliminary measure (highly recommended), look up the website at whois.net. All registered websites are listed here, and information, including the names of registrants, is provided.

**Validity of Web Content**

A website can be safe to visit, but still present some risks, especially for students using the Internet for research.

Easily accessible web development software means that anyone can develop a professional-looking website. However, a professional appearance is no guarantee that a site's content is accurate or **valid**. The validity of the information you find when doing research is critical to the quality of your own work.

Read the short scenario below that illustrates how invalid content can affect your schoolwork. This scenario shows a harmless result of assuming that a website is accurate and trustworthy. The result of carelessly believing what some websites say can be far more serious. What Sabah did in this scenario is just what many of us do. She found a website that seemed to answer a question or relate to her topic, and she took its content as the truth.

***Sabah's Labour's Lost***

*Mr. Johnson is a Grade 11 English teacher. He gives his class an assignment to create a presentation on the life and works of William Shakespeare. When the rough drafts are handed in for Mr. Johnson's review, Sabah, one of Mr. Johnson's students, is surprised by some of her teacher's comments.*

*After two weeks of online research and writing, Sabah thinks her rough draft is thorough and accurate. She is not prepared for Mr. Johnson's review comments showing that many of her facts are incorrect. For example, she wrote that Shakespeare had written one of his works in 1625, nine years after his death. She wrote that his son, Hamlet, died at age 11, but his son's name was actually Hamnet. And, worst of all, she wrote about his play Falstaff and the Publican. Shakespeare created a character named Falstaff, but he did not name a play after him.*

*Sabah and Mr. Johnson reviewed the websites she had used in her research. Most were acceptable, but two stood out as problems. One site was full of spelling and grammatical errors. Those errors included the misspelling of the name of Shakespeare's son and the 1625 date. The second website turned out to be a university student's online project. He had written a detailed description and review of a fictitious Shakespeare play to demonstrate his understanding of common elements in the Bard's works. Unfortunately for Sabah, the university student had not clearly indicated his work as fiction.*

**The following website provides hints, instructions and tools to help you evaluate the validity of content on websites*.***

[U.C. Berkeley

Library Web](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/imagemap/TopNav)

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| **Finding Information on the Internet: A Tutorial**  **http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Evaluate.html**  **Evaluating Web Pages:**  **Techniques to Apply &** **Questions to Ask**  *UC Berkeley - Teaching Library Internet Workshops* |
| [About This Tutorial](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/About.html) | [Table of Contents](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/FindInfo.html) | [Contact us](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/contact.html) |

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| Looking for the [Web Page Evaluation Checklist PDF form](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Handouts.html#EvalForms)? |

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| **Evaluating web pages skillfully requires you to do two things at once:**   1. Train your eye and your fingers to employ a series of **techniques** that help you quickly find what you need to know about web pages; 2. Train your mind to think critically, even suspiciously, by **asking a series of questions** that will help you decide how much a web page is to be trusted.   This page is organized to combine the two techniques into a process that begins with looking at your search results from a search engine or other source, follows through by investigating the content of page, and extends beyond the page to what others may say about the page or its author(s). |

**1. What can the URL tell you?**

**Techniques for Web Evaluation :**

1. Before you leave the list of search results -- before you click and get interested in anything written on the page -- glean all you can from the URLs of each page.

2. Then choose pages most likely to be reliable and authentic.

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| **Questions to ask:** | **What are the implications?** |
| **Is it somebody's** [**personal page**](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Glossary.html#PersonalPage)**?**   * Read the [URL](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Glossary.html#URL) carefully:   + Look for a personal name (e.g., *jbarker* or *barker*) following a tilde ( **~** ), a percent sign ( % ), or or the words "users," "members," or "people."   + Is the server a commercial [ISP](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Glossary.html#ISP) or other provider of web page hosting (like aol.com or geocities.com) | Personal pages are not necessarily "bad," but you need to investigate the author carefully.  For personal pages, there is no publisher or domain owner vouching for the information in the page. |
| **What type of** [**domain**](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Glossary.html#Domain) **does it come from ?**  (educational, nonprofit, commercial, government, etc.)   * Is the domain extension appropriate for the content?   + Government sites: look for .gov, .mil   + Educational sites: look for .edu  *(Note that this can include personal student and faculty pages as well as official college and university pages)*   + Nonprofit organizations: look for .org  *(Note that this is no longer restricted to nonprofits)* * Many [country codes](http://www.iana.org/domains/root/db/), such as .us, .uk. and .de, are no longer tightly controlled and may be misused. Look at the country code, but also use the techniques in sections 2 and 4 below to see who published the web page. | Look for appropriateness. What kind of information source do you think is most reliable for your topic? |
| **Is it published by an entity that makes sense?**  Who "published" the page?   * In general, the publisher is the agency or person operating the "[server](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Glossary.html#Server)" computer from which the document is issued.   + The server is usually named in first portion of the [URL](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Glossary.html#URL) (between *http://* and the first */*) * Have you heard of this entity before? * Does it correspond to the name of the site? | You can rely more on information that is published by the source:   * Look for New York Times news from **www.nytimes.com** * Look for health information from any of the agencies of the National Institute of Health on sites with **nih** somewhere in the domain name. |

**2. Scan the perimeter of the page, looking for answers to these questions:**

**Techniques for Web Evaluation :**

1. Look for links that say "**About us**," "**Philosophy**," "**Background**," "**Biography**", etc.

2. If you cannot find any links like these, you can often find this kind of information if you **Truncate back the URL**.

INSTRUCTIONS for Truncating back a URL: In the top Location Box, delete the end characters of the URL stopping just before each / (leave the slash). Press enter to see if you can see more about the author or the origins/nature of the site providing the page.

Continue this process, one slash (/) at a time, until you reach the first single / which is preceded by the domain name portion. This is the page's server or "publisher."

3. Look for the date "last updated" - usually at the bottom of a web page.

Check the date on all the pages on the site.

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| **Questions to ask:** | **What are the implications?** |
| **Who wrote the page?**   * Look for the name of the author, or the name of the organization, institution, agency, or whatever who is responsible for the page   + An e-mail contact is not enough * If there is no personal author, look for an agency or organization that claims responsibility for the page.   + If you cannot find this, locate the publisher by truncating back the URL (see technique above). Does this publisher claim responsibility for the content? Does it explain why the page exists in any way? | Web pages are created with a purpose in mind by some person or agency or entity.  You are looking for someone who claims accountability and responsibility for the content.  An e-mail address with no additional information about the author is not sufficient for assessing the author's credentials.  If this is all you have, try emailing the author and asking politely for more information about him/her. |
| **Is the page dated? Is it current enough?**   * 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. Don't use it without confirmation. | How recent the date needs to be depends on your needs.  For some topics you want current information.  For others, you want information put on the web near the time it became known.  In some cases, the importance of the date is to tell you whether the page author is still maintaining an interest in the page, or has abandoned it. |
| **What are the author's credentials on this subject?**   * Does the purported background or education look like someone who is qualified to write on this topic? * Might the page be by a hobbyist, self-proclaimed expert, or enthusiast?   + Is the page merely an opinion? Is there any reason you should believe its content more than any other page?   + Is the page a rant, an extreme view, possibly distorted or exaggerated? * If you cannot find strong, relevant credentials, look very closely at documentation of sources (next section). | Anyone can put anything on the web for pennies in just a few minutes. Your task is to distinguish between the reliable and questionable.  Many web pages are opinion pieces offered in a vast public forum.  You should hold the author to the same degree of credentials, authority, and documentation that you would expect from something published in a reputable print resource (book, journal article, good newspaper). |

**3. Look for indicators of quality information:**

**Techniques for Web Evaluation :**

1. Look for a link called "links," "additional sites," "related links," etc.

2. In the text, if you see little footnote numbers or links that might refer to documentation, take the time to explore them.

What kinds of publications or sites are they? Reputable? Scholarly?

Are they real? On the web (where no publisher is editing most pages), it is possible to create totally fake references.

3. Look at the publisher of the page (first part of the URL).

Expect a journal article, newspaper article, and some other publications that are recent to come from the original publisher IF the publication is available on the web.

Look at the bottom of such articles for copyright information or permissions to reproduce.

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| **Questions to ask:** | **What are the implications?** |
| **Are sources documented with footnotes or links?**   * Where did the author get the information?   + As in published scholarly/academic journals and books, you should expect documentation. * If there are links to other pages as sources, are they to reliable sources? * Do the links work? | In scholarly/research work, the credibility of most writings is proven through footnote documentation or other means of revealing the sources of information. Saying what you believe without documentation is not much better than just expressing an opinion or a point of view. What credibility does your research need?  An exception can be journalism from highly reputable newspapers. But these are not scholarly. Check with your instructor before using this type of material.  Links that don't work, or that lead to other weak or fringe pages, do not help strengthen the credibility of your research. |
| **If reproduced information (from another source), is it complete, not altered, not fake or forged?**   * Is it retyped? If so, it could easily be altered. * Is it reproduced from another publication?   + Are permissions to reproduce and copyright information provided?   + Is there a reason there are not links to the original source if it is online (instead of reproducing it)? | You may have to find the original to be sure a copy of something is not altered and is complete.  Look at the URL: is it from the original source?  If you find a legitimate article from a reputable journal or other publication, it should be accompanied by the copyright statement and/or permission to reprint. If it is not, be suspicious.  Try to find the source. If the URL of the document is not to the original source, it is likely that it is illegally reproduced, and the text could be altered, even with the copyright information present. |
| **Are there links to other resources on the topic?**   * Are the links well chosen, well organized, and/or evaluated/annotated? * Do the links work? * Do the links represent other viewpoints? * Do the links (or absence of other viewpoints) indicate a bias? | Many well developed pages offer links to other pages on the same topic that they consider worthwhile.  Pages that offer opposing viewpoints as well as their own are more likely to be balanced and unbiased than pages that offer only one view. Anything not said that would be said if all points of view were represented?  Always look for bias in text and links, especially when you agree with what's being said. |

**4. What do others say?**

**Techniques for Web Evaluation :**

1. Find out what other web pages link to this page.

a. Use [alexa.com](http://www.alexa.com/):

Type or paste the URL into alexa.com's search box.

Click on the "Get details" button.

You will see, depending on the volume of traffic to the page:

* Traffic details.
* Contact/ownership info for the domain name.
* "Related links" to other sites visited by people who visited the page.
* Sites linking in to the page.
* A link to the "[Wayback Machine](http://archive.org/web/web.php)," an archive showing what the page looked like in the past.

b. Do a **link:** search in Google, Yahoo!, or another search engine where this can be done:

1. Copy the URL of the page you are investigating (Ctrl+C in Windows).

2. Go to the search engine site, and type **link:** in the search box.

3. Paste the URL into the search box immediately following **link:** (no space after the colon).

The pages listed all contain one or more links to the page you are looking for.

If you find no links, try a shorter portion of the URL, stopping after each /.   
*Note: Different search engines give very different results for "link:" searches. We suggest trying more than one.*

2. Look up the title or publisher of the page in a reputable [directory](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/SubjDirectories.html) that evaluates its contents ([ipl2](http://www.ipl.org/), [Infomine](http://infomine.ucr.edu/), [About.com](http://www.about.com/), or a specialized directory you trust).

3. Look up the author's name in Google or Yahoo!

For the most complete results in Google, search the name three ways:

a. without quotes:  **Firstname Lastname**

b. enclosed in quotes as a phrase:  **"Firstname Lastname"**

c. enclosed in quotes with **\*** between the first and last name:  **"Firstname \* Lastname"** (The **\*** can stand for any middle initial or name in Google only).

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| **Questions to ask:** | **What are the implications?** |
| **Who links to the page?**   * Are there many links? * What kinds of sites link to it? * What do they say? | Sometimes a page is linked to only by other parts of its own site (not much of a recommendation).  Sometimes a page is linked to by both its fans and its detractors. Read both points of view. |
| **Is the page listed in one or more reputable directories or pages?** | Good directories include a tiny fraction of the web, and inclusion in a directory is therefore noteworthy.  But read what the directory says! It may not be 100% positive. |
| **What do others say about the author or responsible authoring body?** | "Googling" someone can be revealing. Be sure to consider the source. If the viewpoint is radical or controversial, expect to find detractors.   Also see which blogs refer to the site, and what they say about it. [Google Blog Search](http://www.google.com/blogsearch) is a good way to do this; search on the site's name, author, or URL. |

**5. Does it all add up?**

**Techniques for Web Evaluation :**

1. Step back and think about all you have learned about the page. Listen to your gut reaction. Think about why the page was created, the intentions of its author(s).

If you have doubts, ask your instructor or come to one of the library reference desks and ask for advice.

2. Be sensitive to the possibility that you are the victim of irony, spoof, fraud, or other falsehood.

3. Ask yourself if the web is truly the best place to find resources for the research you are doing.

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| **Questions to ask:** | **So what? What are the implications?** |
| **Why was the page put on the web?**   * Inform, give facts, give data? * Explain, persuade? * Sell, entice? * Share? * Disclose? | These are some of the reasons to think of. The web is a public place, open to all. You need to be aware of the entire range of human possibilities of intentions behind web pages. |
| **Might it be ironic? Satire or parody?**   * Think about the "tone" of the page. * Humorous? Parody? Exaggerated? Overblown arguments? * Outrageous photographs or juxtaposition of unlikely images? * Arguing a viewpoint with examples that suggest that what is argued is ultimately not possible. | It is easy to be fooled, and this can make you look foolish in turn. |
| **Is this as credible and useful as the resources (books, journal articles, etc.) available in print or online through the library?**   * 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? | What is your requirement (or your instructor's requirement) for the quality of reliability of your information?  In general, published information is considered more reliable than what is on the web. But many, many reputable agencies and publishers make great stuff available by "publishing" it on the web. This applies to most governments, most institutions and societies, many publishing houses and news sources.  But take the time to check it out. |

**More About Evaluating Web Sources**

* [**Evaluating Information Found on the Internet**](http://guides.library.jhu.edu/evaluatinginformation) *<http://www.library.jhu.edu/researchhelp/general/evaluating/>*   
  An excellent guide from the Milton Library at Johns Hopkins University.
* For annotated descriptions of many other good guides to evaluating web pages, search the subject "Evaluation of Internet Resources" in [**ipl2**](http://www.ipl.org/) <*http://www.ipl.org*>.

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| **Quick Links** |
| [**Search Engines**](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/SearchEngines.html) **|**[**Subject Directories**](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/SubjDirectories.html) **|** [**Meta-Search Engines**](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/MetaSearch.html) **|** [**Invisible Web**](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/InvisibleWeb.html) |

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Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at   
<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/contact.html>.

[[ HELP/SEARCH ]](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/Help/)[[ CATALOGS ]](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/Catalogs/)[[ COMMENTS ]](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/Comments/)[[ HOME ]](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/)  
Last update 05/08/12. Server manager: [Contact](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/Comments/)

**ASSIGNMENT: Website Validity**

**Use the information in this reading to evaluate whether the following websites are valid, or bogus. Make 10 points to support your decision. Example (are there spelling mistakes, grammatical errors; what does the URL tell you about the site, does the expert being quoted turn up any questionable results when you do a google search??**

**Choose two websites to evaluate.**

<http://www.mjt.org/>

<http://www.genochoice.com/>

<http://zapatopi.net/treeoctopus/>

<http://www.thepregnancytester.com/>

<http://www.geoffmetcalf.com/bread.html>

<http://www.boring.ch/childsoldiers/>

<http://www.fvza.org/>

<http://www.policeguide.com/cgi/criminal-search.cgi>

<http://www.historyhouse.com/>