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 judgment 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 source.

Your challenge is to ensure that the websites you visit and the information you access are authentic. So…how do we do that?

**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.

**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. 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.

***Sarah'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, Sarah 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 Sarah, the university student had not clearly indicated his work as fiction.*

**EVALUATING WEB PAGES**

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

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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 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:**

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:**

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?  .  Links that don't work, or that lead to other weak or fringe pages, do not help strengthen the credibility of your research. |
| **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?**

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?**

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).

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:** | **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. |

**ASSIGNMENT: Website Validity**

**Task: Use the information outlined above to evaluate whether the following websites are valid, or bogus.**

**Method: Select two of the following websites and thoroughly assess whether they would be a good source to use for research.**

**You may present your findings in a table, point form, paragraph form, or a combination of formats. What is important is that you provide evidence (at least 10 points) to support your decision/claim, as to whether the website is valid or bogus.**

**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?, etc.**

**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/>