

Evaluating Web Sources

Types of web pages

Advocacy - The primary purpose of this type of page is to influence public opinion. A single person or a group may be responsible for the page. The URL will often end with .org. Examples of advocacy pages include the Green Party [<http://www.greenparty.org>] and the Heritage Foundation [<http://www.heritage.org>] web pages.

Business - The primary purpose of a commercial page is to promote or sell products or services. The URL will most often end with .com. Examples include Amazon.com [<http://www.amazon.com>] and the Dell Computer [<http://www.dell.com>] web sites.

Entertainment - The primary purpose of an entertainment page is to provide amusement and enjoyment. The URL may have a variety of endings. An example is the Internet Movie Database [<http://www.imdb.com>].

Informational - The primary purpose of an informational page is providing factual information such as census data, research reports or a calendar of events. Information is found on many different types of web pages so the URL could have a variety of endings. Examples include the Library of Congress Country Studies [<http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/cshome.html>] and the National Gallery of Art schedule of exhibits [<http://www.nga.gov>].

News - The primary purpose of a news page is to provide current information on regional, state and national events. The URL will often end with .com. An example is the Washington Post web site [<http://www.washingtonpost.com>]

Personal - Personal pages are diverse and may be devoted to a hobby or favorite activity. Interactive pages like blogs and MySpace are also personal. The URL may have a variety of endings, including .com, .net, and .edu.

Evaluation Step 1: What can the URL tell you?

When performing a web search the first piece of information you can use to evaluate a web source is the URL. 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. Then choose pages most likely to be reliable and authentic.

Techniques for evaluation: Look at the host name to determine the publisher, agency or person responsible for the site. Have you heard of the publisher or agency? Does it correspond to the name of the site? Determine what kind of information source you think is most reliable for your topic and what types of domains are most likely to have that kind of information. In general, it is better to rely on information published by the source, such as an article from the *Washington Post* found on the *Washington Post* site.

A personal name following a tilde (~), a percent sign (%) or the words **users** or **people** indicates a personal page. Also check to see if the provider is a commercial ISP (Internet Service Provider) or other provider of web page hosting (Geocities, AOL, etc.) You need to check the authority of authors of personal pages carefully.

Evaluation Step 2: Authority

Scan the web page for links that say About, About Us, Background, Biography, etc. These sections often give information about the purpose of the web site. If you do not see these type of links, do some URL cutting. Delete the end characters of the URL stopping just before each /, then press enter. Continue the process until you find the information you want or you reach the first single /.

Look for the name of the author or organization responsible for the page. You need to find more information than an email address.

Try looking for more information by or about a person or organization by doing a search in Google.

What are the credentials of the author? If you can't find any information about the author's credentials; or if the page seems to be the work of a hobbyist think very carefully about using the page as a source.

Evaluation Step 3: Quality of Information

- Why has this information been posted and how objective is it?
- Is the point of view of the person or organization obvious?
- Can you determine if there is a bias or a slant to the information being presented?
- If there is advertising on the page, is it clear what relationship exists between the author of the material and the advertiser?
- Is the purpose of the web site to inform or to broadcast an opinion?

Evaluation Step 4: Content and Coverage

- How comprehensive is the web site?
- Is there a large amount of information available or does the web site consist primarily of links to other web pages?
- Is the information presented on the page consistent with your knowledge of the topic?
- Are references or bibliographies posted on the page?
- Is the source of the information stated or is a list of resources provided? Is it a scholarly source?
- What is the source of the information?
- Is it the opinion of the author?
- Is it based on research or documentation?
- Is the information accurate?
- Compare several different sources to make sure the information is accurate. With statistical information this is especially important.
- Is the web page free of grammatical and spelling errors?

Evaluation Step 5: Currency

Web pages should state the date when they were created or updated. Don't use undated factual or statistical information. For some topics current information is important, for other topics that is not the case.