



10 Questions for Evaluating Websites

Anyone can publish anything very quickly on the free Internet. The page you are looking at can represent the best ideas in a field or personal rants, etc. You must examine what you find, compare it to what you know and determine if what you have found is the best of what is known about a subject. Below is a list of clues you can use to determine the value of an Internet source.

Authoritative sites have clear authorship, are current (provide a date and don't contain dead links), are well-designed and easy to read and navigate, contain information that you can verify in other sources (include a bibliography of sources used), and clearly state their bias or scientific credentials.

When you find a page, check it out using the following methods. (If you find a well-designed page on teen smoking from the well-known Mayo Clinic, you don't have to apply all these steps. The information is probably as good as it gets. If you find a page by an unknown group advocating the legalization of marijuana, you should follow through on all the steps.)

1. **Design:** Reputable sites are well-designed and organized. Watch out for weird backgrounds and meaningless graphics (more interested in effects than ideas). Click on links on the page. Are the links active? (Deadlinks=old pages)
2. **URL:** The domain name address of the page can give you information about who is responsible for the site. (For example, in the location <http://onhealth.com/ch1/index.asp>, "onhealth.com" is the domain name. Is it a .com (commercial), .edu (educational), .net (network operations), .gov (US government), .mil (US military)? Delete the URL back to the domain name if there is no link to a homepage. In the example above, you would delete back to the base URL, <http://onhealth.com>. This will take you back to the main page for the domain name.

Watch for the ~ in addresses on edu sites. The .edu lends the credibility of a university, but the ~ can mean a personal page with no official sanction. Watch for k12 sites. These may be student research papers. Don't cite other student papers. You may use their bibliography to find the sites they used.

A note about sponsored links: Some search engines clearly label "paid" sites but some do not. (Advertisers pay a fee to have their sites come up to the top or side of a search list.) In *Google*, these sites are outlined with a pastel color and say "Sponsored link".

3. **Date:** Look for a date on the page. Scroll up and down and look all around.
4. **Site description:** Check for an "About this site" link somewhere on the home page menu bars. Read the information given. What kind of individual or organization is represented? Consider this information as you read the pages.
5. **Related sites:** Go to the Alexa search engine (www.alexa.com) Find the site using keywords or the URL (try and use the domain name for the site). Click the "Site info for..." link. Who owns the site? Click and examine the Overview, Traffic Details, Related Links, and Sites Linking in Links. Learn anything more about the site?
6. **Web Links:** From the Google homepage, click "Advanced search." Under Page-Specific Search, past the URL of the target page in the dialog box after "Find pages that link to the page". How many pages link to the site? What kinds of organizations do they represent? Why do you think they made a link to this page?

7. **Find your search terms on the page:** Sometimes the search terms you entered bring up a page that seems unrelated to you're the idea you were looking for. Sometimes it's difficult to find the search words you entered on the page. Here's a tip: look for an option in your browser to words on the page. (Control F often works.) Another trick when using *Google* is to look at a cached version of the page. Look for the link to Cached on the last line of the *Google* entry. Click this link and *Google* will show you what the web page looked like when the search engine indexed the page. *Google* will show you the page with your search terms highlighted.
8. **Responsibility:** Read any information about the organization or individual responsible for the page. Consider the intention of the author/sponsoring organization. Is there an obvious bias?

Check for link to email the author or webmaster. (The author is responsible for creating the content. The webmaster is responsible for the programming. Sometimes they are the same person. If you can't find out anything about the author or the sources the author used to create the content, email them and ask.

You may want to find out if information about the group or individual has been published elsewhere. Use standard resources on our library home page like encyclopedias, library catalogs, magazine (*EBSCO*) and newspaper (*ProQuest*) databases. Do a *Google* web search on the author's name or organization responsible for the site.

9. **Connecting information:** How does this information compare with what you already know? If you don't know if the information is accurate or are in doubt, look for the same information in another source. Use an encyclopedia or news database like *Infotrac*.
10. **Mentor:** Ask a human in your life for help in evaluating content. Discuss what you have learned with a parent, teacher, adult friend—someone who has been living and learning a long time. Let him or her help you put what you learn on the web into the framework of human knowledge!



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Your name: _____

Enter comments on your web page below.

Page URL: _____

1. Is the site well-designed and easy to use?

2. What can you learn about the site from the URL?

3. Can you find a date on the page?

4. Is there an "About this site" link? What does it tell you about the organization responsible for the site?

5. What kind of sites are related to this site? Are there any sites listed that you did not expect? Is this a high traffic site? (What is the traffic ranking?) Is there a site contact listed?

6. What kinds of sites link to this site?

7. Find your search terms on the page. Does this help you understand how those words are used in the page? Look at the cached version. Has the page changed recently?

8. Find an author or organization responsible for the page. Is there an obvious bias? Try to locate more information about this person or group by searching for the name in *EBSCO databases*, *ProQuest*, or *Google*. What did you learn?

9. How does the information on the page compare to what you already know about this topic?

10. Ask your teacher or another adult about the topic. What is their opinion of the author/organization or the information on the site?

Is this an authoritative web page? Why or why not? Explain your answer.