

Tutorials

How Can I Tell if a Website is Reliable?

The Internet contains some extremely valuable, high-quality information sources – and it also contains some very unreliable, biased sources of misinformation. That is its nature; anyone who can manage to finagle some webspace can post a website. That puts a higher burden on you as a researcher to evaluate the quality of each website you use, whether it's for a class assignment or your personal use. Sometimes Internet sources can be more accurate than print sources. Sometimes it is better to stick with print sources. Different courses may require research of different levels of academic rigor. This tutorial is designed as a guide to help you evaluate whether a particular Internet site is appropriate for your purposes.

1. Who authored (wrote) the site?

o **How to find out:**

- Look for an "About" or "More about the Author" link at the top, bottom or sidebar of the webpage. Some pages will have a corporate author rather than a single person as an author. If no information about the author(s) of the page is provided, be suspicious.
 - Does the author provide his/her credentials? What type of expertise does s/he have on the subject s/he is writing about? Does s/he indicate what his/her education is? What type of experience s/he has? Should you trust his/her knowledge of the subject?
- Try "Googling" the author – search his/her name at www.google.com. What kinds of websites are associated with your author's name? Is s/he affiliated with any education institutions? Do commercial sites come up? Do the websites associated with the author give you any clues to particular biases the author might have? "Google" with caution – remember that sometimes more than one person can share the

- same name.
2. Who published the site?
 - **How to find out:**
 - **Look at the domain name of the website** – that will tell you who is hosting the site. For instance, the Lee College Library website is: <http://www.lee.edu/library>. The domain name is "lee.edu." That tells you that the library website is hosted by Lee College.
 - Do a search on the domain name at <http://www.whois.sc/>. This site provides information about the owners of registered domain names. What is the organization's main purpose? Check the organization's main website, if it has one. Is it educational? Commercial? Is it a reputable organization?
 - Don't ignore **the suffix on the domain name** (the three-letter part that comes after the "."). The suffix is usually (but not always) descriptive of what type of entity hosts the website. Keep in mind that it is possible for sites to obtain suffixes that are misleading. Here are some examples:
 - .edu = educational
 - .com = commercial
 - .mil = military
 - .gov = government
 - .org = nonprofit
 3. What is the main purpose of the site? Why did the author write it and the publisher post it?
 - To sell a product?
 - As a personal hobby?
 - As a public service?
 - To further scholarship on a topic?
 - To provide general information on a topic?
 - To persuade you of a particular point of view?
 - **How to find out:**
 - **Scan the homepage of the website.** Is it cluttered with advertising? Does the page appear to be professionally designed? Is the writing trying to persuade you to buy something?
 4. Who is the intended audience?
 - Scholars or the general public?
 - Which age group is it written for?
 - Is it aimed at people from a particular geographic area?
 - Is it aimed at members of a particular profession or with specific training?
 5. What is the quality of information provided on the website?
 - **Timeliness:** when was the website first published? Is it

regularly updated? Check for dates at the bottom of each page on the site.

- Different publication dates will be acceptable depending on which type of information you're looking for. If you're looking for statistics, information on current events, or information in fields like science, technology or healthcare, you probably need the most up-to-date information available. If you're looking for information that doesn't change, such as Mark Twain's date of birth or who led the Union Army in the Civil War, it may not matter as much if the website is a little older as long as it is published/authored by a reputable source.
- **Does the author cite sources?** Just as in print sources, web sources that cite their sources are considered more reliable. It shows that the author has done his/her homework and is familiar with scholarship in the field.
- **What type of other sites does the website link to?** Are they reputable sites? If the author references online material, does s/he provides links to the material referenced?
- **What type of sites link to the website you're evaluating?** Is the website being cited by others?
 - Go to either www.yahoo.com or www.google.com. In the search box, type "link:[name of your website]" with no space after the colon. An example using the Lee College library website would look like:

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link:http://www.lee.edu/library
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The resulting search will contain websites that link to your site. Does it include reputable or well-known sites?

6. How does it all add up?

- Compare the information you've gathered about your website to your information needs -- does this website provide an appropriateness of fit? Not all websites will work for all purposes – a website that is fine for finding general information on a disease may not work for a nursing student's paper.
- If you are in doubt, ask your instructor or a librarian for help!