Web Page Evaluation

Evaluating for Accuracy

Evaluating Web information for accuracy is extremely important, because using information from a Web site that is not credible information will negatively affect your research quality (and probably your grade).

The information on Web sites may be inaccurate by accident, or it may be intentionally misleading. Either way, there are methods you can use to determine the accuracy of the information.

What evidence should you look for on a Web site when evaluating it for accuracy? A very good indicator is if the author provides a bibliography or list of references to show where he found the information. This list or bibliography should be compiled of credible sources. Otherwise, the author is both presenting and citing bad information!

A very good indicator of accurate information is......drum roll, please...............PEER-REVIEWED!! This should be a phrase that is burned into your memory before your first year at college. Remember, scholarly sources are often peer-reviewed. If a source is peer-reviewed, it has been through a lengthy and thorough editing and fact-checking process by experts. It's given the green flag before it's even published. This is why peer-reviewed sources are so valuable, because you can count on their accuracy and authority.

Another way to prove a source's accuracy is to verify the information in another credible source. (Can you see how using questionable sources creates additional work for you??) If you can find the same information and verify it on another CREDIBLE site, then you can use information from the source you were evaluating (or simply use it from the credible one where you verified the information).

Spelling -

Look at the wording on a Web page as well when judging for accuracy. If there are spelling errors or grammatical errors on a Web site, don't use it. If the author/creator didn't even take the time to spell check or look words up, then chances are he/she wasn't very careful verifying facts either.

When in doubt about whether or not a source is credible, ask a librarian. That's one of the reasons we are here.

Evaluating for Bias

Much of the information that you encounter every day is written in a biased way. Understanding what bias is and how to recognize it is essential to quality research, as well as making you a well-informed citizen in our society.

What exactly is bias? A bias is a viewpoint or belief that causes a person to be unable to make an objective judgment. It is a positive or negative attitude toward something. In other words, a person who has a bias may distort information to support his own beliefs or feelings about the subject matter.

Because bias is so common, it is important that you are able to evaluate information before you accept it as truth.

The following questions can help you determine if information has a bias:

- Who made the statement?
- What does the person have to gain by your believing the statement?
- Is there evidence to support the claims in the statement?
- Does the statement make sense?

Despite the journalistic idea of "objectivity", every news story is influenced by the attitudes and backgrounds of its interviewers, writers, photographers, and editors.

Not all bias is deliberate. You can become a more "aware" news reader or viewer by watching for the following journalistic techniques that allow bias to "creep" into the news. They are:
BIAS BY SELECTION OR OMISSION -

- The editor chooses to use or NOT use a news item or story.
- Details in a story can be ignored and others included to give readers or viewers a different opinion about the events reported. (ex. Several people booed a prominent politician at his speech, but the newspapers did not report it, or the reporter made a very big deal of it.)
- Bias by omission is difficult to detect. Reader/Viewer must compare news reports from a variety of sources before the omission might be obvious.

BIAS BY PLACEMENT -

- Where the story is placed in the publication influences what a reader/viewer thinks about its importance.
- If it's hidden with the classifieds instead of near the front, readers may view the content as unimportant.

BIAS BY HEADLINE -

- Headlines are the MOST READ parts of a paper.
- Headlines can summarize a story, as well as present carefully hidden bias or prejudice in the choice of headline words.
- They can convey excitement where little or none exists.
- They can express approval or disapproval.

Examine the two covers below, which were both published during the President Obama's first campaign for the presidency against Sarah Palin and John McCain. Do the headlines used on the magazines influence the way you feel about Sarah Palin? How about Michelle Obama?
BIAS BY PHOTOS, CAPTIONS, AND CAMERA ANGLES

A newspaper or news show can choose photos to influence an opinion about a person or event.

- Some pictures flatter a person, and some make them look unpleasant.
- Captions underneath newspaper photos can also show bias.

Visual images on television news are extremely important and can influence how people feel about an event or person. Study the following pictures below. Compare how each one makes you feel, just based on the camera angle or expression on the subject's face.
BIAS BY NAMES AND TITLES USED -

This refers to the labels used by the news media or author to describe a person, place, or event. The choice of label used may influence the way the reader/viewer feels about that person, place, or event. For example, using the term, "ex-con" would create a different impression than using the sentence, "Served time years ago for a minor offense". Calling someone a "freedom fighter" is different from calling him a "terrorist".

BIAS BY CROWD COUNT OR STATISTICS -

Numbers surrounding events can be worded to over inflate something, or an opinion can be inserted in the numbers or statistics to change the reader's reaction. For example, a story about an air crash can sound less devastating with the sentence, "Only minor injuries in the air crash" as opposed to "A hundred injured" and "Voter turnout estimated to be around 25,000" sounds a lot better than "Only 4 percent of voters are expected to turn out."

BIAS BY SOURCE CONTROL -

You should ALWAYS be aware of this aspect of your information sources, regardless of whether or not you suspect bias. Where does the information come from? Who is the source? Is it the reporter? An eyewitness to the event? A public safety officer, like a police or fire official? An elected official or political organization? A company executive? Internet blogger?

Is the information valid in the source, or is it a "puff piece" to make a person, group, or company look good or as part of a publicity stunt?

BIAS BY WORD CHOICE AND TONE -

This type of bias is similar to the choice of words used in the headline, except this one refers to the choice of words used in the story. Positive or negative words can be used to evoke an emotional response from the reader/viewer.

For example, calling someone underweight is a neutral choice of descriptor, however, calling the same person scrawny can have a negative effect while choosing the word, slender might have a positive effect.

Why Is It Important to Evaluate for Bias?

Once you start evaluating information for bias, you will begin to see that a large amount of the information you view is presented in a biased manner. It might be used to sell products, promote beliefs, etc. If you have the capability to analyze information for bias and recognize it, you can judge the information impartially and determine if the information you are viewing can help you reach your research goals.

Evaluating for Purpose

When evaluating a Website, one of the criteria you should consider in the evaluation of the information is, "What is the author's purpose for presenting this information?"

Did the author create it to provide educational or factual information? Was it created as entertainment? As advertisement to sell a product? To persuade someone's point of view? To advocate a cause? It's so important for a researcher to be able to recognize ALL of these listed purposes when viewing Web sites to use in research assignments.

If you're not sure what the author's purpose is, there are some clues usually hiding in the Web page. You just have to do a little digging and investigation to find them.
Here are some ways to help identify a Web site's purpose and some questions to ask yourself about the information:

- Look at the words used in the title of the page or the headings on the page. These words can sometimes help you identify purpose.
- Look for a link to the Web page's mission statement or a link that says About Us or something similar.
- Does the information on the site seem "balanced" or is it slanted toward one perspective? If it's slanted, the author's intent may be to persuade people to that viewpoint. Watch for editorial type information, opinions, etc. These can be commonly found on personal Web sites or blogs - Not the type of site you want to cite research information from. You should also avoid forums, unless you are looking to quote someone's opinion there.
- Look for any history of the company, if it is a company. This may help you determine who the information is intended for.
- If the information is someone's opinion, and they make sure reader's are aware of that, does the author support his arguments well with other sources? Consider checking out those sources as well.
- Do the authors/sponsors make their intentions or purpose clear? Is the information fact, opinion or propaganda? Does the point of view appear objective and impartial? Are there political, ideological, cultural, religious, institutional or personal biases?

Determine why you think the Web site was created. Was it to?

- **Inform**
  
  For example: Web sites providing information on laws, regulations, and services (governmental sites--federal, state, local); available collections and services (library sites), available courses, programs, and services (educational sites). Is the Web site associated with a college, university, or professional journal? Is the information written by a scholar?

- **Entertain**
  
  For example: games, puzzles, pictures, books, magazines, gossip, information about television or radio shows, celebrities, fictional characters. Is the information you want to use considered gossip? Is it speculative, or without reliable references? Is it meant entirely for entertainment purposes? Is it satirical and not meant as fact?

- **Share information**
  
  For example: hobbies (genealogy, stamp collecting), fandom (actors, celebrities, shows)

  - **Advertise/Sell a product or service** (business/marketing)

  For example: almost any product imaginable from flowers to automobiles.

  - **Influence views, beliefs, elections** (advocacy)

  For example: pro/con {issue}, actual and parody candidate/ballot issue pages.

  - **Provide up-to-the-moment news**

  For example: current events, play by play sports, television and radio stations, newspapers. Related to advertising, because the pages want readers to continue accessing them or to watch or purchase another version.

  - **Personal enjoyment**

  For example: pages created by individuals (child or adult) who are not affiliated with any group or organization. These may have some or many of the above mentioned purposes (and occasionally provide excellent information and/or links to other pages), although most of them are for fun.
It is SO IMPORTANT that a researcher take the time to determine the purpose of a Web site before using information from it in research.

If you’re not sure about the purpose, and are still guessing after you’ve investigated the page, then you should ALWAYS verify the information taken from the page in question by finding the SAME information on other, more “well known” reputable Web sites before using it in research.

Evaluating for Authority

Probably THE most important criterion to consider when evaluating information from Web sites, in my professional opinion, is authority. Knowing WHO is providing the information you are reading is not only important, it is crucial to quality research. When you are evaluating a site for authority, you are trying to figure out if the author or group behind the content provided can be trusted to provide credible, accurate information.

If you've ever evaluated a Web site, you know that often it can be very difficult to determine who that WHO is....

You already know that ANYONE can create a Web site and fill it with information. That is why it is so important to be able to find out the author's identity and his or her qualifications or expertise in order to determine the credibility and reliability of the information.

You may not be able to find a specific name, like "Bob Thompson". Often, individual author's names are not found on larger sites, which are compiled by many people.

The Web site author, therefore, might be an individual person; a commercial company; an educational institution; a government agency; or a non-profit organization. This is often evident by the domain, although do not rely on it to be 100% accurate. Commercial sites often use .com; educational sites use .edu; government sites use .gov; and non-profits and advocacy groups use .org. Again, choosing to use information solely because of the domain type is not a good idea. Always do a little more investigating before giving the information the "all clear".

You should be VERY suspicious if you do not see ANY information about the person or company providing the information on the Web site. If they can't even explain who they are or what they do, then they are probably not authoritative enough to provide you with other valuable information.

You should definitely be able to find contact information, like an email address somewhere on the page. There may even be a short (or long) biography about the author. If the author provides this, it is a good sign, because that means they are taking personal responsibility for the content of the site.

Another trick you can do is to "Google" the author's name. Does the author have a “Web presence”? In other words, is there information on other sites or pages about the author's credentials, expertise, qualifications, etc.? Are there other articles written by the author? If the sponsor of the site is a news organization, is there journalistic integrity in the information provided? Does the news source publishing the information have a good reputation?

If the author shares information on a personal blog, be careful. That doesn't mean you should not use the information, because some blogs provide some useful references. Just make sure you validate the information you find on a blog by locating it on other reputable Web sites.

To conclude this lesson on authority, I will say this - If you cannot find any information about who is providing the information on a Web site, DON'T USE THE SITE!!!!!!!!!

Evaluating for Relevance

When you evaluate a Web site for relevance, you are really just determining if the information on the Web site is useful to your topic. Even the most current and accurate information is useless if it does not help you explain your thesis or answer your research question.
Here are some questions and points to keep in mind when considering the relevancy of a source:

- Does the source answer your main or focused research questions? If the information in the source does not help you answer a question or develop a topic/thesis for your research, then it's not relevant, and you don't need the information.
- Who is the source’s intended audience? You shouldn't use sites like Searchasaurus to locate information for a college research paper. Even though it may be good information, a.k.a. accurate and credible, it's not on the same par as information from scholarly journals.
- Is the site dedicated to your specific research topic? Obviously, if you are writing a research paper on the connection between skin cancer in younger people and tanning beds, then information on a site like The American Cancer Society would be relevant and appropriate to your needs.

- Is the site a scholarly one? I can't stress this enough - if you are doing college-level research, you should be using college-level sources!
- Weight your options! If you're not sure if the site is relevant to your needs, then keep looking for better options.

**Evaluating for Currency**

Evaluating your Web information for currency is important, especially if your topic is a time-sensitive one. What does it mean to be time sensitive? Well, if the scope of a topic changes often over the course of say, several months, such as medicine, technology, fashion trends, etc., then it is time sensitive.

Obviously, articles written about technology or medicine several years ago are not going to be considered current information about a topic. They’ll be fine for background or historical information, but they will fall short on being current and accurate.

When you are evaluating a Web site for currency, you must locate the copyright date for the page. Once located, you must then determine if the date is current enough information on your research topic.

Here are a few questions you should ask yourself when evaluating a Web site for currency:

- When was the site published or posted?
- When was the site last updated?
- Do the links on the page function correctly? If there are a lot of broken links, it might have been awhile since the site was last updated.
- How important is it to my topic that my information being current? Can I use background/historical information from this site?

Your teacher or professor may tell you that your information needs to be current and within a specific time period. This is fairly common, so make sure you are aware if this is criteria your teacher expects you to know.

**Fact vs. Opinion**

Fact vs. opinion - The examples your elementary teachers presented to you were probably pretty easy to figure out - "It is 45 degrees outside", or "Chocolate milk is better than regular milk".

Unfortunately, it's not always that easy to figure out when someone is inserting opinion into information. And with more and more user-generated content on the Internet, it can become difficult to see the difference between fact and opinion, when it is carefully crafted to sound like news or information.

**Key points to remember:**
FACTS - These are statements that can be proven or disproved using objective data. It is something known to exist or to have happened.

OPINIONS - These are statements that express a judgment, view, conclusion, or interpretation of something. They cannot be proven to be true or false.

ANALYTICAL INFORMATION - This is the interpretation of facts. This is where some opinion might start to sneak into information.

SUBJECTIVE INFORMATION - This is when opinion makes its way into the information presented. It is not a BAD thing, as long as you recognize that the author of the information is presenting it subjectively. Much of the information which you encounter on a daily basis is a mixture of facts AND opinions. To determine if a statement is a fact or opinion, ask yourself if there is other factual information out there that could prove or disprove what you are reading. If such information exists, then the information is FACTUAL.

So, why is it important that you recognize the difference between fact and opinion? Well, other than not wanting to look like a doofus when you use someone's opinion as a fact in a college research paper, if you are able to distinguish between fact and opinion, you will be able to identify when something is merely an interpretation of a fact, and avoid using those opinions in research.