

Evaluating Internet Sources

How do I know if an Internet source is reliable?

The Internet offers many resources for writers if its information is used correctly. There are guidelines to use when evaluating a website, but these are not hard to pick up. The following suggestions are designed to help writers assess the value of material they gain on the Internet so that they can effectively incorporate these sources into their writing.

1. Know what kind of site you are examining. Most websites fall into one of five categories: informational pages (e.g. www.winthrop.edu), news and journalistic sources (e.g. www.cnn.com), advocacy pages (e.g. www.alleycats.org), personal home pages, and commercial or entertainment pages (e.g. www.thex-files.com). Each is mounted for a different purpose; use your knowledge of what kind of site you find to determine whether the page writer may have a bias you need to consider. For example, a “.com” site wants to sell you something!

2. Know who provided the information you find. Anyone who can get a web account can post anything. Reliable Internet pages will include the following: who the author is (name and credentials), when the material was posted or last updated, the kind of site on which the information appears (can anyone post on the site?), cross-references or sources for factual material, and footnotes or a bibliography. If you can't find out anything about the author, you might do well to treat the information with caution.

3. Cross-check the information with other sources. If the information on a website cannot be cross-checked with information from other sources such as print articles, books, or reputable publications, you need to treat the information as an unsubstantiated opinion. The stronger the claim, the more verification you should seek.

4. Check the relevance, accuracy, and currency of the information. Using information that contains mistakes, typos, exaggerations, or inflammatory statements – no matter how eye-catching – can seriously weaken your credibility with your readers, just as using outdated figures or statistics can.

5. Make sure you document anything taken from a website the same way you would document any other source – otherwise you are plagiarizing. There are handouts available in the Writing Center on how to correctly document Internet sources.

6. Finally, use common sense. Not everything posted on the Internet can be believed, so you have to balance the attractiveness and ease of access on the Internet with a strong scholarly skepticism. Make sure to use Internet sources in conjunction with other sources so that you can add depth and variety to your writing. Remember, you serve as your own quality control in regard to the information placed on the Internet.