



Mary Livermore Library
University of North Carolina at Pembroke
PO Box 1510
Pembroke, NC 28372-1510
Reference: 910.521.6656
Circulation: 910.521.6516
Fax: 910.521.6547
www.uncp.edu/library/

Evaluating Web Resources

When searching the Web for academic information, it is important to evaluate every website you look at to determine if the information is relevant to your needs and is acceptable for college-level research. Evaluating websites for academic worth is not an exact science, but with the help of evaluation criteria, the task can be made easier. Use the criteria found below when doing research on the Internet to determine if potential information sources should be used.

Evaluation Criteria

Accuracy:

- Is the information verifiable?
- What is the source of the information presented?
- Is the data complete?

Audience:

- Who is the intended audience of the information? Students? Professionals? Practitioners? Researchers? Educators? Consumers? Customers?

Author:

- Who is the author or creator of the information?
- What are their qualifications and background or training? Degrees, profession?
- Can you verify the information about the author from another source?

Bias/Point of View:

- Does the information present a one-sided view?
- Does the website give facts or opinions?
- Is the information geared toward supporting one particular viewpoint?
- Are there references to other sources that can confirm or question a point of view?

Currency:

- Is the information current enough to be relevant to your research?

Publisher:

- What is the reputation of the publisher or organization that created the information?
- Are they qualified to publish information on this topic?

Scope/Coverage:

- Does the source cover the information adequately?
- What is the time span of the subject coverage?
- Is the subject covered broadly or is it a more narrow focus?
- Does the website provide references to additional material on the topic?

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Timeliness:

- When was the information published?

Validity:

- Can the information be confirmed or verified using other sources?

A Note About Wikipedia...

Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that can be edited by anyone on the Internet. A simple search in Google for a common person, place, or event like the Revolutionary War usually appears near the top of the results list. Wikipedia has become a popular site for most web surfers. But when considering Wikipedia as an academic resource, it is generally regarded as a source that should not be used when writing research papers. The main reason college professors discourage students from using Wikipedia is because of its easy to edit nature. In all entries, it is impossible to determine the credentials of the author of each article. Most times, articles have been edited by several people, of which may or may not be an authority on the subject. For this reason, professors do not consider Wikipedia a reliable resource for academic research.

Other Things to Consider...

Domains: Every web page has a domain which describes its purpose. For example:

- .edu = a page from a college or university website
- .gov = a page from a government agency website
- .com = a page from a company or business
- .org = a page from an organization/non-profit

Think about the purposes of all of these types of pages. Why does the page exist?

Web Design: Look at the style and functionality of the Web site, layout, navigation, appearance, etc.

If a page looks cheap, the information is most likely not reliable. Stay away from pages that are plastered with advertisements and poor design elements.

Check the Links:

Make sure the links on the page are up to date, accurate, and well-organized. If not, find another site.

Accessing the Site:

Is there a fee charged to visit the site, is it compatible with your browser, and are there software/hardware requirements? This may not necessarily affect the content of the site, but it could affect the ability to access it.