Evaluating Websites
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Determining a website’s credibility and usefulness is fairly straightforward. It just takes a little detective work and some critical thinking. Use this tip sheet to help you!

1. Authority & Credibility

The website: Looking at the URL can sometimes help you figure out where a website is coming from. There are many different domain types – here are some of the more common ones:

- .com – commercial enterprise (often selling goods and services)
- .edu - educational institution (*Often a tilde [~] followed by a person’s name near the end of an edu address indicates a personal website, created by a student or faculty member)
- .gov – government agency
- .net – network (general purpose websites and internet providers)
- .org – usually a nonprofit organization (providing programs & services)

The Author: A writer’s reliability and authority add believability, substance, and weight to a research paper or project.

Ask yourself:

- Can you tell who wrote the text on this site? Was it one person? Was it an organization?
- Does the author/organization have the expertise, training, education, etc. to write knowledgeably about this topic?
- Is the author a member of a profession or an organization or in some other way an expert on the topic? Or is THIS a reputable organization in the field?

Do the detective work:

- Many authors’ credentials (MD, PhD, etc.) and/or affiliation (university, business, hospital, association, etc.) are listed with their name on a web site, or in an About Me section.
- Look for references and/or links at the end of an article or the bottom of the page detailing the references the author used. Or maybe there are links within the text, rather than at the end. Using references shows the depth of research the writer has done. When references from another expert are used they add credibility and weight to the writing.
2. **Transparency & Objectivity**

Ask yourself:
- What is the website about?
- Who is the author and what is his/her purpose for writing this?

Do the detective work:
- Look for a Mission Statement on the website. It will tell you the intentions of the site’s author(s). It may be called a few different things, and can usually be located at the bottom, top, or on a sidebar of the homepage. Look for these types of links:
  - *mission statement* or *mission*
  - *about* or *about us*
  - *what we do*, etc.
- Providing this information is called *transparency*. A transparent website openly explains what they are doing and why they are doing it. Beware of a site where you cannot locate this information, or any website that is not straightforward with who they are, what their mission is, or what they expect to gain from offering information.
- What is the tone or voice the author uses in presenting this information?
- Is the site expressing an opinion? Is the information one-sided, or are both sides of an issue presented?
- Can you make your own decision regarding the information provided? Or is the site pushing you to one side of an issue?

3. **Accuracy**

- You want to know if the information and/or data being presented is true and accurate. This is sometimes harder with a website than with an article in a database or a print publication, since you can’t always tell who, if anyone, has checked (and double-checked) it before it was posted.
- If you are thorough with step #1 you can at least determine whether or not to trust the source. Step #4 will assist you in deciding if the information being presented is accurate in terms of being up to date. Putting these two assessments together can help you decide if a website is accurate.

4. **Currency & Scope**

Ask yourself:
- When was this written? Can you tell when the page was updated? Website dates can usually be found at the bottom of a homepage, or at the end of a specific section that was updated.
- If it refers to other sites, articles, studies, polls, research, how old is that information? Do links to other sites still work?
- Does your research question require that you have the latest information? Does the subject matter you’re covering change frequently (like medical research)? Do you need older information for background?
- Does the website give detailed information/reporting? Or is it a summary/overview? Does it present new research? Which is appropriate for your needs?