Evaluating Web Sites and Web Resources - Questions to Ask

compiled by CNC Library

Finding credible resources online can be challenging. You want to be able to find accurate information from reputable sites. Here are some guidelines to help you figure out if the web site you are looking at has good subject matter for your research project as well as looking at the overall design and usability.

The first section of this guide looks at the content of web sites for the accuracy of the material presented - this is the information, data, facts and stats that you are searching for to support your project. In order for your project to be accurate, you must find and include the correct information to support your work.

The second section looks at questions you should ask about the design, functionality, and usability of the web site in order to determine if the web site is suitable for your needs.

Finding Reliable Web Resources

Authority

When you are searching for information for your research project, you want to make sure you are using trustworthy sources. Anyone can publish on the internet. When you write a scholarly paper, you are arguing or proving a point so you want to make sure you are right. When you are using a web site you want to make sure the source is credible. You want to make sure that the author of the information you are using knows what they are talking about and are qualified to give the information. Is the author an expert?

- Is the author's name, qualifications, or the name of the organization responsible for the page clearly stated?
- Does the address (URL) reveal anything about the author or source?
    - .ca means it is a Canadian based web site
    - .com, .net, .biz usually refers to companies and everything else
    - .edu sites are mainly American educational institutes
    - .gov applies to American government
    - .org sites are special interest groups or organizations, usually not for profit
- Is the information peer reviewed or scholarly?
- Is there a cost for viewing some or all of the content on the site? If you have to pay, they might just be selling something. Make sure you examine the extent of the information and the credibility carefully before you proceed.
- Is there a referral to other sources and is the information verifiable?
- If an author is identified, is he/she a professional or accredited authority on the subject?

- If an organization is responsible, is it a reputable organization recognized as an authority on the subject?

Accuracy

There are no standards or regulations in place to ensure that information found on web sites is true or correct. The accuracy of the information is important to getting your research right.

- Is the information correct?
- Can it be verified?
- Is the information cited or refereed?

Currency

Currency refers to both the information presented and the web site itself. You want to be able to use the most up-to-date information in your research or see that the web site maintains their information on a regular basis. Questions you might want to ask yourself when looking at a web site are:

- When was the web site created?
- Is the web site updated and revised regularly?
- Are the sources recent?
- Is their data and information up-to-date?
- Are there dates of copyright, updates, publication or broadcast included?

Scope and Coverage and Relevancy

There is so much information on the web that it can be overwhelming. Try to stay focused on your question when looking at web sites to determine relevancy and scope.

- Is the information on the web site relevant and useful to your research?
- Does the site cover your subject carefully or does it brush over the facts and data?
- Does the web site link to other important sites with comparable information?
- Why is this site preferable to you than other resources?

Objectivity/Purpose

Objectivity should be clear to the user. Is the author trying to push an agenda or just providing information? Be on the look-out for bias. The purpose of the web site should be clear to the user. Is the site trying to teach? Persuade? Inform? Entertain?

- Is there potential for bias or conflict of interest? (Does the organization or individual have a political, ideological, cultural, religious, institutional, or personal motive for what they are saying?)
- Is the author of the site trying to sway the user?
- Is there a lot of advertising? What is being advertised?
- Is the web site trying to explain or persuade or sell something?

Evaluating Web Sites for Usability and Design

This section looks at the overall design of the web site to determine its overall usefulness and usability. A good web site will be user-friendly and technically sound. Sometimes, if you are having trouble determining whether the content is adequate, the design and technical aspects of a web site can help you determine whether or not you are looking at a quality site.

Design

- Does the site use color, graphics, backgrounds, or type styles which are attractive? Do any of them detract from the appeal/usefulness of the pages?

- Does the site have a consistent design (from one page to the next)?

- Is the layout of the pages appealing?

- Is the layout organized and logical?

- Is the site easy to use?

    o Does it have its own "Search" button?

    o Is there a "Site Map" or "Directory" or "A-Z Index"?

    o Are buttons/menus clear and easy to find?

    o Are you able to find/navigate to your page with a minimal number of links?

    o Is it easy to see where you are at on the site? Are there 'breadcrumbs' to show you where you are?

    o If you have a particular disability (hearing, sight, etc.) is the site designed to accommodate your use?

- Are the pages free of typographical or spelling errors?

- Are the pages designed so you don't have to do a lot of scrolling? (i.e. presented in short pieces, or if a long document, presented with a table of contents, or links to different sections of the page?)

Content

- Is the home page information evident and clutter-free?

- What is the purpose of the site or page? (business, entertainment, education, research)

- Who is the intended audience?

    o Is the content appropriate, suitable, of interest to this audience?

- Does the site have original content or does it mainly just provide links to other sites?

    o Is the information current? (reviewed and/or updated? does it have a date posted? Is there a 'What's New?' button)

- Is the information at a suitable level (not too elementary or advanced for your needs)?

- Is the page "interactive"?

- o Can you contribute to it? (e.g. fill out a survey, take a quiz, chat with other users, submit a suggestion, order a product, extract information or produce a report that is tailor-made to your needs).

Technical

- Does the page load quickly?

- Does the back button work?

- Are there any "dead links"? (connections to other pages or sites that didn't work properly)

- Did you need to upgrade your browser or install any special software or "plug-ins" to view any of the content? If so, what was needed? Easy to install? Free or pay-for-use? Are these special technical requirements suitable to the audience the site wishes to attract?

- Does the site work with various browsers (Internet Explorer, Firefox, Chrome, etc.)?

Credibility

- Is the site rated or reviewed by a reliable source?

  - o Where did you hear about it? If you found it using a search engine, was it "high on the list" of search results?

- Have you looked at a variety of sources before determining this is one you will use? Would you be comfortable using this source for a research paper?

Cost

- Is it reasonable to pay for the information you are seeking?

- Is it easy to set up an account and make payments?

- Are payment methods secure? (check for statements about how credit card information and other personal details will be protected)

Personal Information

- If the site collects or requests information about you, do they tell you exactly why they want this information?

- Do you have to set up an account or register just to use the site? If you have to register, are the reasons clear and your privacy ensured?

- Are their privacy guidelines stated?

- Are you entering information on a secure site (https://)?