

GenGuides | EVALUATING WEBSITES

by *Genwriters* | Tips and Techniques

The internet has proven to be a valuable asset for genealogists. No longer do you need to spend hours bend over a microfilm machine or necessary to travel to an ancestor's hometown to access genealogical documents. The internet has exploded with documents and indexes and webpages and photos. Is all this information too good to be true? Some of it is. Being wary of information gleaned from the internet is being wise. How do you know if the information you found on great-grandpa Jones is accurate? As researchers, we must evaluate each website used on our research trail just as we evaluate each document or book. It is important to keep in mind that all (or nearly all) of the information found on the internet is considered a secondary source. Now that doesn't necessarily mean secondary is any less reliable, but it does need to be verified against primary sources. Using the internet can save many steps and many dollars for the savvy genealogist. Information on the internet can lead us to primary sources we might not have discovered otherwise. Implementing a strategy of evaluating websites will help to ensure validity in our research.

STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO ENSURE THE INFORMATION RETRIEVED FROM THE INTERNET IS RELIABLE

1 Is the website a commercial site or a personal one? Commercial sites often pull their content from primary sources, providing indexes and, on occasion, scans of actual documents. Most personal websites are done by fellow researchers such as yourself. This information is almost always secondary in nature, and is most frequently presented in the form of a transcription or abstract. These methods of presentation lend themselves to errors.

2 The domain name extension can provide clues as to the reliability and authority of a website:

- .gov - government websites
- .edu - educational institution websites
- .org - websites by organizations and non-profit entities
- .com - most other entities utilize the .com prefix

3 Who authored the site? Particularly for a personal website, does the author provide his or her credentials? Is there a link to a page titled "About Us," "Background," or "Who Am I"? When the author of a website provides credentials, the reliability of the information on that website can be determined. Does the author provide contact information thereby taking responsibility for the contents of the web page? If he is not willing to identify himself, perhaps the quality of the information provided should be questioned.

4 Are there sources or footnotes on the website indicating the source of the information? These sources or footnotes can direct you toward the same documents used by the writer of the website so that you can

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verify the information. Finding the secondary source information on a website can lead you to primary source material. The information should be verifiable. Are the footnotes or other citations in a format that enables you to access and verify the information?

5 Is the website well designed and well organized? Can you navigate through the site without getting “lost”? These are signs of a quality website; quality in design often, but not always, supports quality of content.

6 Is the site well maintained? When was the site last updated? Are there broken links scattered through the site? An ill-maintained site is usually reflected in its stale and out-of-date content. Are there spelling and grammatical errors? Are links provided to lead you to other reputable sites?

7 What is the purpose of the site? Is it hard to differentiate between the ads and the content? You might question the value of information when blinking ads and pop-up boxes permeate your experience on the website. If the focus is more on sales than on providing information, you might want to click out of that website quickly.

8 Can you determine the central theme of the website, and the depth of coverage? Does the author of the website appear to be knowledgeable in the topic(s) being presented? Do the credentials of the website

author match the content of the website? Anyone can publish anything on the web. Just because you find information published on the web doesn't mean that information is accurate and reliable.

9 Does the website have a good reputation? Is it widely known? Are there positive reviews of the website available either on other websites or in print publications? Do other reputable websites link to the site being evaluated?

What to do when you find conflicting information between two or more websites? Evaluate each site according to the criteria presented above. This should enable you to eliminate one or more of the conflicting websites. Then follow up by referring to primary sources.

A Primary Source is a document created near the time that the event occurred and is typically created by someone having direct knowledge of the event and the parties involved. A Primary Source is often the first record of an event and can be the most reliable of sources.