

# Evaluating Web Sites

## Steps you can take to ensure the information retrieved from the internet is reliable:

1. Is the web site 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 web sites 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. Look at the domain name:
  - .gov - government web sites
  - .edu - educational institution web sites
  - .org - web sites by organizations and non-profit entities
  - .com - most other entities utilize the .com prefix
3. Who authored the site? Particularly for a personal web site, 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 web site provides credentials, the reliability of the information on that web site 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 provide should be questioned.
4. Are there sources or footnotes on the web site indicating the source of the information? These sources or footnotes can direct you toward the same documents used by the writer of the web site so that you can verify the information. Finding the secondary source information on a web site can lead you to primary source material. The information should be verifiable. Are the footnotes or other citation in a format that enables you to access and verify the information?
5. Is the web site well designed and well organized? Can you navigate through the site without getting "lost"? These are signs of a quality web site; 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 An ill-maintained site is usually reflected in its stale and out-of-date content.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 to 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 web site. If the focus is more on sales than on providing information, you might want to click out of that web site quickly.
8. Can you determine the central theme of the web site, and the depth of coverage? Does the author of the web site appear to be knowledgeable in the topic(s) being presented? Do the credentials of the web site author match the content of the web site?

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