Evaluating Web Pages for Academic Use

Unlike books and periodical articles, Web only sources may be published by anyone. It is important to assess the quality of Web pages before using them for your academic research. Note: if a Web source is a book or periodical article that has a print equivalent, evaluate it as you would the print source. For information regarding evaluating books and periodicals articles, refer to the following Mission College Handout: Evaluating Books & Periodical Articles for Academic Use.

When evaluating Web only sources, consider the following five criteria: authority, accuracy, content, objectivity/bias, and currency.

**Authority:** What are the qualifications/credentials of the person or organization responsible for the information on the web page?

- What does the Domain or URL tell you? (Note that .org does not automatically mean it has authority and .com does not automatically mean it does not have authority, you need to evaluate further.)
- Who is responsible for the site? (Look for clickable links in the title area of the page that may lead to more information about the person or organization. Truncate the URL (web address) to find the “parent” website.)
- Is it clear who wrote the material on the page and are the author’s qualifications for writing on this topic clearly stated?
- Can you verify the author’s qualification from another source?
- What are others saying about the site and/or author? (Do a search to find out)
- Is there a way of verifying the legitimacy of the page’s sponsor? Is there a phone number or postal address? (An email address is not enough.)

If you cannot determine who is responsible for a Web page AND what their credentials are then you should not use it.

**Accuracy:** Is the information correct?

- Are the sources cited? Can you verify the facts in another source?
- Is it clear who has responsibility for the information? Do they have expertise in the subject?

If there is no indication on the Web page for you to determine if the information is accurate, or that the author/publisher has expertise (authority) in the subject, then you should not use it.

**Content:** Does the page adequately address your topic?

- Can you tell what the page intends to cover and does it succeed?
- Is the information available on the current page, or do you need to click on a link to retrieve it? (If you need to go to another page, then you need to evaluate that Web page; not the page with the link.)

If the Web page does not have any new or useful information for your topic, or is just a page with links, then you should not use it.
Objectivity/Bias: Can you determine the purpose and objectivity of the site?

- Is there a slant, or bias?
- Does the site try to sell a point of view or product?
- Is there an obvious purpose or audience?

If the site is not objective, it may still be okay to use it; it will depend on the purpose of your research and your ability to find other sources that present the opposing viewpoint.

Currency: When was the information published?

- Are there any dates posted?
- If material is presented in graphs and/or charts, is it clearly stated when the data was gathered?

If you cannot determine a date, or if the date indicates that the information is not current, it may still be okay to use it, but it depends on your topic.