Evaluating Websites: Ten Short Reminders

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1. Evaluate the web address

    Does the web address end with .com, .net, .edu, or .org? What information does the domain name (www.nameofsite.com) provide?

2. What's the purpose of the site?

    An educational website has no reason to hide its motives for existing. Good sites tell you their mission.

3. Who's the author of this site, and how can I reach them?

    Good websites provide multiple ways to contact the person responsible for the information you see. Remember – not everyone has their own computer, or their own email account. Site authors should be mindful of users on public and/or shared machines, and provide as many ways to reach them as possible (email, snail mail, phone, fax).

4. When was the website produced? Last updated?

    Technology changes constantly, as do the things we know and understand about the past. A good site will be updated frequently. A recent update shows you that someone is taking responsibility for the information you're seeing.

5. How is this site funded?

    Third-party funds may influence the information you see. All websites require some level of funding – the trick is to evaluate both the information displayed on the site, and the sponsors of that information, to judge if the there could be a conflict of interest between the two.

    A random example: if a website investigating the state of the contemporary air and space industry was sponsored by Lockheed Martin, you would have cause be cautious about the objectivity of the information in front of you.

6. What's the authority of the person or organization behind your website to provide information?

    Are you reading someone's journal, detailing a hobby? Are you gleaning information from a site put together by history educators? Give some thought to whether the author seems trustworthy and professional.

7. Does the site provide links and information about internet resources alone, or does it tell you about resources available offline?

   Use your best judgment – some sites are set up to enable users to get the most out of the web. Some, on the other hand, refuse to link you to offline resources because they're hiding, manipulating, or avoiding certain pieces of information.

8. Does the site use animation to get its point across, or require plugins or special software in order to work?

   Remember that not all web users have their own computer, and that even among those who do, many are working with old, slow machines, or with a dial-up connection.   A website should not discriminate against users based upon their ability to download software. Image heavy designs are okay – as long as they provide users with a text-only alternative.

9. Are there broken links or images that don't load?

   Someone should be taking care of the site you're looking at – broken links and images are often an indication of a site that's been abandoned, or that's not being taken seriously.

10. How does this site compare to the range of resources available offline?

   Remember to cross-reference, to use the library, and to think of local sources that could help you establish the trustworthiness of a site.

Catherine Denial, 2007.