



Office of Learning Resources

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Evaluating Web Information

Increasingly, the Internet has become the resource of choice among college students. What's not to like? From the comfort of your room you can point and click your way to more information in less time than ever before. But how do you know the information you've found is any good? How do you judge reliability in cyberspace?

In the world of print, books and articles are published along a continuum ranging from vanity publishing to scholarly or specialized publishing. Vanity publishing characteristically is not subjected to outside review and is often printed at the expense of the author. The other end of the continuum is scholarly publishing which subjects material to rigorous peer review.

If you keep in mind a few basic questions in order to maintain standards, you should be able to protect yourself from bad information:

Is the author readily identifiable? Steer clear of anonymous postings. Anyone can post anything on the web. Does the author provide his/her e-mail address?

What is the author's affiliation? As in print resources, you want to find the most authoritative sources. Look for college or university affiliations as well as think tanks or government agencies.

Has the information been subjected to peer review by a recognizable group, institution or society? In the same way one would value information gleaned from *The Journal of the American Psychological Association* over a blurb in *People* also applies to web sites. The editorial boards of scholarly journals are charged with maintaining the academic standards of their respective publications and subject potential articles to rigorous review prior to publication. Many of the same scholarly societies publishing highly regarded academic journals also maintain web sites. Make these sources your first stop.

Does the site provide sources which can be contacted for confirmation? Like anonymous postings, beware of anonymous sites. Is there an e-mail address? Is there a reviewing agency noted on the site? Does the site provide bibliographic material? Again, these are questions one takes for granted when going through traditional print resources that tend to be overlooked in cyberspace.

Is there a link to a recognized authority? This can provide additional information or, more importantly, the primary source documents or actual studies undergirding the material.

When was the last time the site was updated? Just like printed sources, you want to find the most current information. Try not to be overly impressed by how glitzy or high-tech a particular site appears to be. Many sites of a scholarly nature are heavily text-oriented.

Remember: Just because the information is viewed on your computer screen doesn't mean it's perfect. Proceed with caution.