

## Series

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### Learning How to Learn

#### Evaluating Internet Sites for Academic Use: Some Criteria

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The World Wide Web has revolutionized learning. It provides for real time access to information and represents a means that is less expensive compared to traditional ways of learning.

However, the newness of the medium coupled with the fact that anybody can publish anything on the web, necessitate finding means for evaluating the web contents.

Some criteria have been developed for website appraisal, the key stones of which are: Accuracy, Authority, Objectivity and Currency.

- **Accuracy:**

This can only be truly judged on the basis of some prior knowledge. Main points include:

- is it clear who wrote the contents, and how to contact them? Do they give information about their background and qualifications?
- Is there an editor, and if so, who is it?
- Is the aim of the site stated clearly and does the content match that aim?
- Do the spelling, grammar and composition conform to accepted standards?
- Do the external links lead to sites you know to be trust-worthy?
- Is the information given verifiable – does the writer quote sources?

A site does not have to fulfill all of these criteria to be considered responsible or useful, but if you have to answer "NO" to more than a couple of these questions, you should definitely treat the site with caution and try to verify its claims elsewhere.

- **Authority:**

This means looking for indications of institutional support for a site. Ask yourself:

- Where is the site hosted? Is it an educational domain (e.g. .ac.uk, .edu) or any official domain (e.g. .gov). or is it hosted by a commercial organization (e.g. .com). You can always tell by looking at the last part of a site's address before the single forward slash. Commercial sites are mostly less preferred for academic use.
- Does the site carry advertising – how much and by whom? Is anybody trying to sell you anything? Truly academic sites will generally focus on contents rather than advertising and distractions.

- **Objectivity:**

This can often be assessed by common sense. Important questions include:

- Does the content of the site sound like special pleading?
- Can you detect a bias? Is the bias openly stated? Bias is sometimes inevitable, but being aware of it makes you more wary of taking anything for granted.
- Is the author trying to sneak something past you?

- **Currency:**

This means updating the website to accommodate contemporary issues and new developments. In fact, this is the striking feature that makes the web superior to other sources of learning.

Here are some means by which to tell the currency of a website:

- Is there any indication when it was constructed and (more importantly) when was it last updated?

- Do the external links still work? If many links are dead, the site may be quite old.
- If there is an e-mail link to the author, does that still work, or has the author moved on?

The answer to the above questions and observations posed under those four criteria can be useful for you to evaluate the quality of materials on the internet. This is, in turn, fundamental for research and academic writing.

**Sources and further reading:**

- Check list for evaluating internet sites for academic use. Briefing paper 2. Itsn, Supporting learning and teaching. Contacts: s.cameron@arts.gla.ac.uk

- Thinking critically about World Wide Web resources. Available from:  
<http://www.library.ucla.edu/libraries/college/help/critical/index.htm>
- Evaluation criteria. Available from:  
<http://www.lib.nmsu.edu/instruction/evalcrit.html>
- Internet detective. Available from:  
<http://www.sosig.ac.uk/desire/internet-detective.html>