Evaluating Web Resources

Welcome
Although you most likely evaluate websites on a daily basis, you may not be accustomed to using them and evaluating them for research purposes.

In this tutorial you will evaluate several websites in order to determine their authority, accuracy, and overall trustworthiness.

The Open Web

When you use a search engine like Google, you are searching the “open” web. The “open” web can be accessed by anyone. In contrast, the “hidden” web refers to places on the internet which require authentication to access.

Much of the information you can access through the UA Library is only available on this “hidden” web through a subscription which is only available to UA students, faculty, and staff.

However, most of us still choose to use the “open” web for much of our research, and this tutorial will look at how you can better use the information you will find on the “open” web.

Tips for Evaluation

There is often an unclear line between trustworthy and untrustworthy websites. It takes critical thinking- and practice- to become a wise user of websites.

Below are several buttons that represent the different elements of a website that you want to look at when determining how trustworthy a site may be.

Click on each button to see a list of these different elements. You will want to study these for a few minutes before we move on. They will be available through the tutorial. To print out a PDF file of this Website Evaluation checklist, click on the Resources tab above
Website Evaluation Checklist

Appearance

- The site looks professional (colors, fonts).
- Standard conventions are followed (headers, navigation, contact info, link to homepage).
- The links, images, and other media on the site are present and working.
- This site displays correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation and a professional tone.

Authority

- This site represents a credible organization or institution (see homepage and “About Us”).
- The author (where applicable) has a high level of expertise and experience related to the subject.
- A contact page is present and provides sufficient contact information.
- Appropriate references are listed.
- Other websites link to this website as a reliable resource.

Purpose

- The purpose of this website is to educate or inform.
- The purpose of the site is clear, including any bias or particular viewpoint.
- Facts are presented as facts and opinions are presented as opinions.

Currency

- The information on this site is up to date.
- The website has been updated recently.

Coverage

- The information is general enough or specific enough to be helpful in your research.
- The information provided will help you answer your research question(s).
Practice 1

**History Website**

Your project: You are looking for information on the 1902 forest fire in Washington State

Directions: Take a long look at this website: [HistoryLink.org](http://HistoryLink.org)

Review the Website Evaluation Checklist if you need help in answering the questions.

Would you use this website for a course research paper?

Yes. You can use this website as a resource because from the “About Us” page you can see that the Board of Trustees are historic experts, and the articles provided are authoritative. This particular article also includes 3 reference sources at the end which is a good sign.

Practice 2

**Climate Website**

Your project: You are writing a paper on climate change and need to find scientific data about its effects.

Directions: take a long look at this website: [Science and Public Policy Institute](http://ScienceAndPublicPolicyInstitute.org).

Review the Website Evaluation Checklist if you need help in answering the questions.

Would you use this website for a course research paper?

No. While the Science and Public Policy Institute website appears credible on first glance, a closer look proves that all its articles attempt to debunk global warming. Additionally, the author of this article has no scientific background.

Practice 3

**Health Website**

You are concerned about a relative’s health and want to find out more about heart health and strokes.

Directions: Take a look at this website: [Women’s Health](http://WomensHealth.org)

Review the Website Evaluation Checklist if you need help in answering the questions.

Would you use this website for a course research paper?

Yes. You can use it as a resource. This is a credible site produced by the U.S.
Department of Health and Human Services. There are links to other federal resources and nonprofit organizations, and a phone number is even provided as contact information.

Practice 4
**Greek Mythology Websites**

Your project: You are researching various Greek gods for an assignment in your humanities course.
Directions: Take a long look at this website: [All About History](#)

Review the Website Evaluation Checklist if you need help in answering the questions.

Would you use this website for a course research paper?

No. It is better not to use this website as a resource. While this is a .org domain, the website is clearly biased towards particular biblical beliefs.

Practice 5
**MLK Jr. Website**

Your project: You are researching Martin Luther King Jr. and need to find some background information on him

Directions: Take a long look at this website: [Martin Luther King.org](#)

Review the Website Evaluation Checklist if you need help in answering the questions.

Would you use this website for a course research paper?

No. You should not use this website as a resource. There are a number of indications that this site is biased, and on closer look you can see that it is hosted by Stormfront, a white supremacist organization.

Reflection 1

Time to reflect on what we’ve learned so far. What are some of the features to look for when you are evaluating websites?

Some key features you could have written are:

- Expertise/experience of the author
- Credibility of the sponsoring organization/institution
- Appropriateness of references
- Currency of information
• Purpose of the site

Now let’s look at another technique…

The Power of Comparison

Another good strategy for evaluation is to compare two or more resources on the same topic, analyzing the similarities and differences in the content. You will likely be doing this to a degree anyway, since you need to cite multiple resources in your papers. But doing this intentionally and systematically has a lot of advantages. This can be done by comparing how well they do on the different elements of the Website Evaluation Checklist.

Comparing websites this way will help you:

• Discover which resources are better (more accurate, complete, timely, etc.).
• Discover which resources are biased.
• Discover where the controversies lie in your research topic.
• Improve your analytic skills, and your breadth of knowledge on a topic.

So let’s practice this…

Practice 1

You are researching the controversy over whether or not depression should be considered a mental illness.

Directions: Take a look at these two websites.
Review the Website Evaluation Checklist if you need help in answering the questions.

Then decide, which is a better resource.

A. Is Mental Pain Mental Illness?

B. “Is Depression A Disease?”

ANSWER:

Website A is not the best choice. The credibility of the author is questionable, since the link to “Carrie’s website” is a dead link and she is not easy to find on the web. Going to the homepage, you can see that the Radical Psychology Network has a goal of “challenging psychology’s traditional focus” and believes that psychology has “too often oppressed people.” Reading the first few lines also makes it clear that the author has a
strong opinion on the topic. With no references cited in the article, this means much of
the content could be based on personal beliefs rather than scientific research.

Website B is a much better resource. It is the transcript of a debate between six different
experts, including medical doctors and professors who have written on and studied the
topic. Worth noting, however, is that this transcript is located on the site of one of the
participants, Thomas Szasz, M.D. That said, this transcript and references to it can be
found on other places on the web and is likely accurate. Additionally, you ought to be
aware that the show was taped in 1997, so some of the information may be a bit
outdated. So it is worth looking at other, more recent, resources to compare the
information.

Let’s continue with another example...

Practice 2

You are researching the history of White House in Washington, D.C. for a political
science course.
Directions: Take a look at these two websites.

Review the Website Evaluation Checklist if you need help in answering the questions.

Then decide, which is a better resource.

A. The White House Historical Association

B. The White House-Officious Website of President George W. Bush

ANSWER:
Website A is a much better resource. It is hosted by a charitable nonprofit institution that
has been around since the 1960s. It produces educational literature and films, and
sponsors lectures, exhibits, and other outreach programs. The “Facts” and “Timelines”
portion of the website could be especially helpful. It is worth noting that this association
intends to enhance “appreciation and enjoyment” of the White House, and so it may not
be comprehensive in its coverage, particularly of unseemly or controversial events. For
that reason, it is worth using multiple sources to get the full picture.

Website B is not a trustworthy website. Even though it is a .org, a quick glance at the
content demonstrates that whitehouse.org is a phony “George W. Bush” website.
There is no obvious “About Us” or “Contact” link, but by clicking on the “Web Team”
link at the bottom of the page you will see that the site is a political parody and is
hosted by writers and artists, not historians. While the site is an impressive parody, the
content should not be trusted and it should certainly not be cited in a research paper.
Reflection 2

Let's reflect on what we've learned so far. When comparing multiple websites on a topic, what are some of the things to look for?

Some things you could have written are:

- Credibility of authors or association
- Purpose of the site
- Tone used and level of opinion vs. facts
- Currency of information

Conclusion

Congratulations!

You have completed this tutorial. We hope it has given you some tips and helped you think more critically about resources found on the open web.
If you are ever unsure about whether or not to use a website in your research, ask a librarian or ask your instructor.

Below are some resources that may be helpful to you:

- YouTube Video on Evaluating Websites
- YouTubeWikipedia. Beneath the Surface
- Internet Detective: Wise up to the Web
- Leave Us Feedback