



## School of Liberal Arts

University Writing Center  
"Because writers need readers"

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### Evaluating Electronic Information Sources

*Having the world at your fingertips through the internet is a double-edged sword. On one hand, you can find information about virtually any topic you can think of by doing a simple Google search. On the other hand, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the accurate, reliable sources from the inaccurate, untrustworthy ones. This worksheet is designed to help you find high-quality electronic sources so that you can write accurate, credible papers. As always, be sure to communicate with your professor to ensure that you are using sources appropriate to your assignment.*

#### Suggestions for beginning research:

- *In general*, pages with .edu, .gov, .mil, and .org domains tend to be more reliable than .com websites. These sites are usually managed by not-for-profit organizations and usually have less concern about making money through advertising, a concern which can lead to a conflict of interest.
- Web sites with .com domain names are commercial, meaning they a) sell ad space, b) often charge for access to files, and c) are often Internet Service Provider sites, which people pay to use and post their material – all of which sometimes lead to problems with credibility.
- Narrow your search from the start to sources that offer the following information:
  - Author's name and title or position
  - Author's organizational affiliation
  - Date of page or current version
  - Author's and/or organization's contact information
  - Indicators of information quality (see CARS below)

#### Use the CARS Checklist for Information Quality

The most reliable sources will provide you with answers to ALL of the following questions. The fewer the questions you can answer affirmatively, the less-reliable your source will be.

#### Credibility:

- Is it clear who is responsible for the information being presented? Is the author of the source clearly named? Does the document include author's credentials – education, institutional affiliation, contact information, etc?
- Alternatively, is there a clear link to the document's sponsoring organization? Is there a phone number or mailing address provided for the author or sponsoring organization? An e-mail address alone is not sufficient.
- Evidence of quality control: Is the document from a peer-reviewed journal or reputable publication?
- Metainformation: Does the document include summary information (abstracts, summaries, table of contents) or evaluative information (reviews, ratings, commentaries, other analyses of content)?
  - Indicators of lack of credibility: Anonymity, lack of quality control, negative metainformation, bad grammar, misspelled words, typos, and other indications of carelessness or lack of editorial review.

**Accuracy:**

- Is the date of the document clear and the information current? Is it clear when the page was last updated or revised?
- Is the document timely for your topic? The importance of the currency of your information depends on the type of research project you're pursuing (i.e. the November election vs. the Civil War).
- Is the document comprehensive? Does it include important facts, qualifications, consequences, or alternatives?
- Bias – “Information pretending to objectivity but possessing a hidden agenda of persuasion or a hidden bias is among the most common kind of information in our culture” (Harris). Does the document contain clearly biased language? Words that might betray bias include: obviously, clearly, certainly, or any language which openly criticizes another person or group.
- Indicators of a lack of accuracy include a lack of a date for the document, a lack of clear facts, a document that is clearly outdated (ex. a 1977 article on current technology), or heavily biased language (ex. “There is no truth whatsoever in Einstein’s ridiculous claim that  $e=mc^2$ .”)

**Reasonableness:**

- Fairness – Is the argument balanced and reasoned, rather than slanted or biased? Pay close attention to the tone and be wary of highly emotional arguments (anger = irrationality).
- Objectivity – Are the writer’s biases controlled? A good source should not involve a conflict of interest. For example, an argument in favor of lowering the legal drinking age to 18 might reveal a conflict of interest if it’s being made by an Anheuser-Busch executive.
- Is the information free of advertising? If there is any advertising on the page, is it clearly differentiated from the informational content?
- Consistency – Does any of the information presented contradict itself?
- Indicators of a lack of reasonableness include inappropriate tone or language, exaggerated claims, or conflict of interest.

**Support:**

- Does your source provide documentation of his or her own sources? This may include a bibliography, works cited, footnotes, references, or other documentation.
- Corroboration – Can you triangulate your source? In other words, if one source claims that California is the state with the largest population, can you find at least two other sources that corroborate that information?
- Indicators of a lack of support include the absence of any references to the work of other writers on the subject at hand, whether in-text or in the form of footnotes, works cited, or a bibliography.

**Works Cited**

- Alexander, Jan and Marsha Ann Tate. “Checklist for an Information Web Page.” *Evaluate Web Pages*. Widener University Wolfgram Memorial Library. 2005. Web. October 2010.
- Harris, Robert. "Evaluating Internet Research Sources." *VirtualSalt*. 15 June 2007. Web. October 2010.