

Evaluating Websites

(Finding information you can trust on the web!)

One of the most common questions you may find yourself asking when doing research on the internet is “Can I use this website for my research paper?” How do you know which websites you can trust if you are using a search engine like Google or Yahoo? While library databases provide a higher percentage of scholarly content, valuable information can be found on the web if you know where to look!



What to Consider

- **Author- who created the site?** Is there an institutional or organizational affiliation or sponsorship? Is that institution a trusted one?
 - **Explanation of authorship and the purpose of a website should be clearly indicated.** Most research sites should attempt to inform rather than persuade. Determining a site’s purpose can usually be found through an “About Us” or “Who Are We?” link or something similar. **Do not use anonymous information!**
 - **The web address or URL.** Each and every website has a unique web address or URL. The web address itself has information that can help you determine what kind of website it is. The domain name should give you some idea about what type of organization sponsors the website you’re interested in using. Below are some examples of domain names and the types of organizations that use them (there are more domain names than those listed here.)

Domain name	Where it shows up in the web address	Purpose/Responsible Organization
.gov	http://www.usa.gov	U.S. government
.k12	http://www.mpls.k12.mn.us/	U.S. K-12 schools
.edu	http://www.metrostate.edu	U.S. educational institutions
.mil	http://www.defenselink.mil	United States military
.org	http://www.bbb.org/	Unrestricted (often used by non-profits, but anyone can use it).
.com	http://www.nwa.com/	Unrestricted (often used by companies, but anyone can use it.)
.net	http://www.comcast.net/	Unrestricted (often used by Internet Service Providers, but anyone can use.

Information in a URL beyond the domain name refers to the part of the website you are on. For example, with this URL: http://www.metrostate.edu/library/research_tools/ask.html, the domain is .edu, which means it is the website of an educational institution, and the remainder of the URL indicates the part of the website you are on.

- **Documentation.** Verifiable documentation of information cited within the text. As found in scholarly journal articles, research papers, or books, a legitimate website will cite the sources they received their original information from. This could include reference lists or bibliographies, tables, charts, etc.
- **Currency.** The date the page was created should be clearly noted, along with update and revision dates. Most reputable websites will post their dates as well as make efforts to continually revise or update the information on their site. This information is typically, but not always, found at the bottom of the webpage, or at the header of each blog post or news story. On wikis, the information may change rapidly – check the “history” tab to see revision information.



- **Format.** Some types of sites tend to have less authority than others. Blogs, for example, are frequently updated online journals that may or may not be authored by someone who is credible. Often they are not “scholarly.” Wikis are often editable by anyone, so the authorship can be difficult to determine and the content changes frequently, making it problematic to cite the information. **Wikis such as Wikipedia should be approached with caution for use in research.**

Help with searching

- **Know when to use the web.** The web is a great starting place. It is also a terrific source of citations, historical primary documents, breaking news and company information. It has limited amounts of free scholarly or peer reviewed material – try a library database instead.
- **Get help with good search engines.** Most search engines like Google can help you search better. Try the advanced search tab to limit your search to certain domain names (like .edu). Use quotes to keep words together as a phrase.
- **Ask a librarian.** Look for web links provided through **Library Guides** on the library webpage. You can always ask a librarian for assistance finding websites or other sources.



Available in alternative formats for people with disabilities.
Call Disability Services at 651.793.1549 (voice) or 651.772.7687 (TTY).

Need additional help? Contact the Reference Desk for assistance at 651.793.1614

