Guide to Evaluating Web Sites & Other Online Sources

Ask yourself these questions to help you decide if the information you find online is worth using.

1. Is the information what you expected? Does it seem true?

- How does it compare with what you already know?
- Is it different from information on the same topic that you found on other sites?
- Does it make sense?

If the information is really different from what you already know or seems being told from only one point of view, go on to other sources and forget about this one.

2. Who wrote it?

- Where did the author or authors get their information? Did they cite their sources?
- Did they provide evidence or examples to support what they wrote?
- Why do you think they are providing this information?
- If it is a Website sponsored by a school, college, or university, is this information written by students or teachers?

Okay, you get the idea. Be suspicious of material written by a 3rd grader, or that is just someone's opinion. Be especially careful about materials on controversial science topics or historical events. If the author(s) don't identify themselves as someone who you would expect to be writing about this topic (like a scientist or history professor), then go on to other sources.

3. Is the information up-to-date?

- How old is the information? Does it include recent information?
- If it is a website, how long ago was it updated?

If you're looking for facts about events that happened more than five or ten years ago, you won't need current information, but if you are targeting new technologies, for example, you'd be wise to check for a date when the information was posted.

4. Is the information worth using? How important is it?

- How much information is given?
- How in-depth is the information?

If your online source doesn't have much "meat" to it, it won't do much for your report.

5. Where does it come from and what does it look like?

- Is the information actually on a Web page or does it come from another source like a text file or PDF document or other attachment that you download? Is it part of an online posting or could it be an email?
- Is the information presented in a professional way? Is it easy to navigate?
- If it is a website, how sophisticated is it? Is it just text? Are there images, video and/or sounds?

Be warned that you can't always judge an online source by its professional look, but the sophistication of the source may reflect the effort that went into the writing and research. A thought from an email, for example, or a comment posted in a discussion group may not be your best source.

6. Who recommended this online source to you?

- Did people whom you respect (friends, teachers, librarians, parents, etc.) recommend it as a good place to go for information?
- Did print sources you can trust (textbook, local newspaper, or national magazine) or a respected site (such as Smithsonian, National Geographic, etc.) feature or link to this source of information?

Usually you won't go wrong with a recommendation or link from a person or organization you trust. It's probably the best way to know that an online source is all right for you to use.