Evaluating a Website: Navigating the Potholes on the Information Superhighway

Almost anyone with a computer and an internet connection can put up a webpage and disseminate information to the masses.   Students should be aware that this access means that the results of their research may have not been verified for accuracy at any point of the creation of the webpage.

How to evaluate a website?

When evaluating the accuracy of a website, ask these five questions:

Who wrote the content for the website? – Look for the name of the websites author somewhere in the margins of the website. Does the author present a list of credentials that qualify her as an authority on the subject?   Does the author give contact information where someone could confront her to dispute accuracy?

Does the author document her sources? -- Authors of scholarly articles document their sources so that their audience can check what they say is true. Users of the internet should expect the same from any webpage that they visit. Be sure to evaluate these sources as well. If an author cites only other webpages, you have no way of knowing whether or not she has verified those sites.

Who publishes the website? – Look for a link to the site's homepage. Large corporations generally have more at stake in having an accurate website than individuals, but they should not be trusted without examining their sources. Be wary of personal homepages, sites that individuals create where they present themselves as an authority on every thing from rocket science to how to care for a pet parakeet.

If you can't find a link to the homepage, examine the url (the web address that starts with http://). The following lists the four most common types of domains and explains their implications in verifying the accuracy of the site.

- .COM – These websites may be owned by a corporation or an individual and should be subject to the most scrutiny.
- .ORG – These websites generally exist to persuade readers to support the organizations point of view. Information that is found here is likely to be strongly biased, but generally the organization has a stake in guaranteeing the accuracy of information and verifying their sources.
- .EDU – These websites belong to colleges or universities. Generally, universities websites contain several hundred webpage published by employees or students

and there is no central person verifying the accuracy of these sites. Information on university websites is wrong more times than one may expect.

- .GOV – These sites belong to government organizations and for the most part, the information presented on these sites is accurate. Students should still check to see that the author of the site has documented her sources.

What types of mistakes on the page are obvious? – If an author has a lot of misspellings or uses poor grammar, this is generally not a good indicator of the accuracy of the webpage. If an author does not bother to proofread her content, it's hard to believe that she has spent the time to verify its accuracy.

When was the page written? – Many webpages are out of date and have not been updated in years. Most webmasters will post the date of the last update somewhere on the page. If a site has no date, assume that the information is outdated and look for a different site.

Beware of …

Hearsay – Just because you find the same fact on websites across the web, does not mean it is true. Websites have a tendency to borrow or plagiarize information from other websites without checking the accuracy.

Fancy web design -- It is easy to trust a website simply because it looks sleek and sophisticated, but this trust may be easily betrayed. Don't let flashy graphics cloud your judgment. Follow the steps above to verify the website no matter how professional it looks.

Wikis – In web terms, wikis are web pages that the site's users themselves can easily edit or modify. The largest wiki website, Wikipedia, publishes encyclopedia style articles on everything from the Peloponnesian War to the latest reality show star. These articles are written and edited by users of Wikipedia and often have not been verified for accuracy. Some users of these websites actually purposefully post misinformation on wiki sites.

Search Engines – There is a temptation to believe that the sites that a web search engine returns at the top of their list are the most pertinent to your topic. This is not always the case. Search engines often list wikis or sites of paid advertisers at the top of their search results.

http://www.uiowa.edu/~writingc/writers/handouts/EvaluatingWebsites.shtml