Evaluating Internet Sources

The Internet can be a great resource for researching a paper, but you must be very careful when using it. When researching, it is important to consider how reputable a source is. Always keep in mind the author's point of view and how information presented as fact may actually reflect opinion. On the Internet this becomes an even more pressing concern, because of how easy it is to create a Web site and manipulate information.

Find out who wrote the information.
Anyone can create a Web site, and there are no guarantees that the information on them will be accurate. The Internet is notorious for hoaxes and propaganda. If the site does not clearly identify an author and/or an affiliation with a recognizable organization or publication, then it is best not to cite it in your work. This kind of information is often posted under links titled "About Us," "About the Author," or "Who We Are." It is also a good idea to check if a Web site identifies the date on which it was last updated, so that you can be sure the information is current.

Recommended sites to use for research:

- Web sites of print media, such as *The New York Times* or *New England Journal of Medicine*
- Well-established online publications, such as *MSN Slate Magazine*
- Official Web sites of companies, such as General Motors or Disney
- University Web sites, such as the University of North Carolina Library
- Government resources, such as the Library of Congress

Sites to avoid for research:

- Private Web sites with no academic, institutional, or corporate affiliation

  Though the authors may have put together useful information, it will not be helpful to cite it in your paper.

- Web sites promoting extreme political or ideological ideas

  Information can be easily manipulated to prove a point. Be skeptical.

Search engines
Use Google, Yahoo, Copernicus, and other search engines wisely. Commercial search engines may not always give you all the information you want, and the order of the search results will not always reflect the quality of the Web site. New School University

libraries subscribe to a host of specialized search engines, such as Lexis Nexis and ProQuest that can search academic and subscribers-only publications. These can be very useful for accessing an enormous database of journals, newspapers, and periodicals in a matter of minutes.

Use the Web as a stepping-stone.
Sometimes, even though a Web site might not be a good source to cite in your paper, it can lead you to useful books or articles. For example, though you probably would not cite a 'blog' in your bibliography, you might find postings on it which mention a helpful book or article for you to look up. There are also innumerable book reviews on the Internet, which can help guide your research.

It is usually easy to find basic information on a variety of subjects on the Internet. A Web site may be helpful in providing basics facts about Frank Lloyd Wright's life and style, but you may be better off looking for detailed criticism of his work at the library.

If you cannot figure out how to cite a source, then perhaps you shouldn't.
If no author is listed on a Web site, then it may not be wise to quote it. Look for Web sites which provide the author's name, title, and affiliation, as well as a date of publication. Be very cautious when relying on sites which do not offer this information. When in doubt, go to the library and find a more legitimate source.

Use common sense—if a Web site looks "homemade" or suspicious, do not use it. It's better to be safe than sorry. Remember, the library contains a wealth of wonderful resources, which are much more trustworthy.

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