Resources for Evaluating Sources

WHY?
Rationale for Evaluating What You Find on the Web

The World Wide Web can be a great place to accomplish research on many topics. But putting documents or pages on the web is easy, cheap or free, unregulated, and unmonitored (at least in the United States). A famous Steiner cartoon published in the New Yorker (July 5, 1993) shows two dogs sitting in front of a computer screen; one says to the other, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." The great wealth that the Internet has brought to society is the ability for people to express themselves, find one another, exchange ideas, discover members of a global population whom they would have otherwise never met, and, through hypertext links in web pages, suggest other people's ideas and portray personalities to anyone who comes and clicks. There are some real "dogs" out there, but there is also great treasure.

Therein lies the rationale for evaluating carefully whatever you find on the Web. The burden is on you, the reader, to establish the validity, authorship, timeliness, and integrity of what you find in your online research. Documents can easily be copied and falsified or copied with omissions and errors- either intentional or accidental. In the World Wide Web there are no editors (unlike most print publications) to proofread and "send it back" or "reject it" until it meets the standards of a publishing house's reputation. Most pages found through search engines are self-published or published by businesses, small and large, with motives to get you to buy something or accept their point of view. Even within university and library web sites, there can be many pages that the institution does not try to oversee. The web needs to be free like that!! And you, if you want to use it for serious research, need to cultivate the habit of healthy skepticism, of questioning everything you find with critical thinking.

"How to Evaluate the Information Sources You Find" Olin and Uris Libraries, Cornell University
http://olinuris.library.cornell.edu/ref/research/evaluate.html

Distinguishing Scholarly Journals from Other Periodicals

Webster’s Third International Dictionary defines scholarly as
1) concerned with academic study, especially research,
2) exhibiting the methods and attitudes of a scholar,
3) having the manner and appearance of a scholar.

Substantive is defined as having a solid base, being substantial.

Popular means fit for, or reflecting the taste and intelligence of, the people at large.

Sensational is defined as arousing or intending to arouse strong curiosity, interest or reaction.

1 These links were shared on the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) listserv in October 2005.
Resources

- "Distinguishing Scholarly Journals from Other Periodicals" Olin and Uris Libraries, Cornell University
  www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/research/skill20.html

- "Evaluating Sources of Information" Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University
  http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/research/r_evalsource4.html
  Here you can find guidelines on evaluating a bibliographic citation, the content in the source, internet sources, and further resources such as essays on how to evaluate internet and other information sources.

- "Evaluate your Sources" Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries
  http://www.library.vcu.edu/jbc/ref/getstarted.html#evaluating
  Encourage students to compare and contrast their sources- an interesting technique to incorporate into papers and essays. Research involves evaluating information critically to yield more knowledge. Ask yourself these questions: Who is the author? Is the information accurate? Is the information objective? Is the information current? See the website for other relevant questions and links to evaluation tips.

- "Critical Evaluation of Resources" J. Barker, University of California Berkeley Library
  www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Evaluation.html
  For those who are conducting research it may be useful to determine the suitability of a book or an article. Will the source provide a basic overview of the topic or delve into a focused discussion? Does the breadth of the work match your own expectations? Does the resource cover the right time period that you are interested in? Who is the expected audience? When was the source published? What are the academic credentials of the author? Documentation serves to support the author’s work; sources without documentation may not be as reliable as those with documentation. Are the sources primary or secondary sources?

Primary vs. Secondary Research:
In determining the appropriateness of a resource, it may be helpful to determine whether it is primary research or secondary research.

Primary research presents original research methods or findings for the first time. Examples include:
- A journal article, book, or other publication that presents new findings or new theories, and usually includes the author’s data.
- A newspaper account written by a journalist who was present at the event he or she is describing is a primary source (an eye-witness, first-hand account), and may also be primary "research”.

Secondary research does not present new research but rather provides a compilation or evaluation of previously presented material. Examples include:
- A scientific article summarizing research or data, such as in Scientific American, Discover, Annual Review of Genetics, or Biological Reviews.
- An encyclopedia entry and entries in most other Reference books.
- A textbook

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2 These sources and links were shared on the POD listserv in October 2005.