

TECH 10 EVALUATING RESEARCH SOURCES

Research is an important part of many assessment types. When gathering research material you must be able to evaluate it for relevance to your topic and your focus. You will need to analyse the material for its facts, arguments, and opinions; select material that is directly applicable to your research; and record the publication details so that you can acknowledge your sources and include them in your reference list.

Although the following guide focuses on evaluating Internet resources (because anyone can, and does, publish on the Internet), the principles apply to all types of resources you might draw on for your research.

Scan

By analysing the URL you can usually identify:

- the organisation hosting the web page (after http:// or www.)
- an author’s name (further back in the URL, sometimes with a ~)
- the country of posting (a two-letter country name such as .au (Australia), .uk (United Kingdom), .it (Italy), .jp (Japan), .in (India), but no code for the USA, where the Internet originated)
- the type of domain. Domain names are no longer an accurate indicator of the type of content. Anyone can now apply for a .com, .info, .biz, .org, or .net domain, so they no longer strictly mean ‘commercial organisation’, ‘information’ (can be information about a product), ‘small business’, ‘nonprofit organisation’, and ‘network provider to subscribing customers’. The sites .gov and .edu are still restricted to government and educational institutions, but personal pages are frequently made available on university sites, and the university does not necessarily stand by the content of those pages.

Scan the page for:

- menu headings and links (‘Home’, ‘About Us’, ‘Philosophy’, ‘Biography’, ‘Contact’ [particularly a physical address or phone number], footer)
- last updated statement, or copyright year (currency, site maintenance).

The following table provides a guide to seven types of site.

Type of site	How can I tell?	Examples
Personal home page, social networking page, blog, etc	Often informal. Can be a professional site (e.g. university professor’s web page). URL may contain ~, person’s name, .net, .com	Facebook pages http://www.climateark.org/blog/ http://blogs.nature.com/climatefeedback/ http://climatechange.foreignpolicyblogs.com/ http://blogs.shell.com/climatechange/ http://stephenschneider.stanford.edu/Climate/ClimateFrameset.html

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Type of site	How can I tell?	Examples
Special interest site Often presents a particular point of view	Usually a non-profit organisation URL may contain .org 'Home' or 'About Us' page, Blog	http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/ http://www.savetheearth.org/about.html www.greenpeace.org.au/ http://users.picknowl.com.au/~sasa/default.htm (Soil Association of South Australia, encourages organic methods of farming and gardening)
Professional site	URL may contain .org 'Home' or 'About Us' page	http://www.psychology.org.au/ (Australian Psychological Society) http://www.ama.com.au/ (Australian Medical Association)
Educational institution	URL may contain .edu 'Home' or 'About Us' page	http://www.anu.edu.au/index.html (Australian National University) http://www.saceboard.sa.edu.au
Government site	URL may contain .gov	http://www.statehouse.go.ug/ (Uganda) http://www.whitehouse.gov/ (USA) http://www.mofa.go.jp/ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan) http://www.gov.ru/main/page8.html (Russian Federation) http://eng.kremlin.ru/ (President of Russian Federation)
News or journalistic site	URL contains name of news service 'Home' or 'About Us' page	www.abc.net.au http://edition.cnn.com/ http://www.theage.com.au/ http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/
Commercial site	.com, .co, .info, .biz, .net 'Home' or 'About Us' page May include catalogue and/or shopping cart	http://vitalityplusaustralia.com.au/products.asp?id=29 http://blogs.shell.com/climatechange/

Responsibility

Is there an author statement? Is any information about the author provided?

Which company or organisation is responsible for placing the information on the website?
Read the About Us and Home pages, and the footer.

Has the article previously been published (e.g. a newspaper article that is provided on special interest site, that acknowledges the author and newspaper)? What were the original publication details? What can you find out about authority and bias of the newspaper?

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Credibility

- Does the website provide information about the author (e.g. qualifications, where he works or has worked)?
- What do others say about the author or organisation? Search the Internet.
- What is the author's relationship to the subject? Can this be verified?
- Is the organisation legitimate?
- Are there contact details for the author or organisation (especially a physical address or phone number, not just an email address)?
- Can the information be verified? Are there references, footnotes explaining where the author got his or her information, or links to sources that can back up statements?
- Is there a header or logo that indicates the document was produced by an organisation? Do the pages on the website have a similar look? Are they full of spelling and grammatical errors, or do they appear to have been proofread?

Is the purpose of the web page to:

- inform, give facts or data, teach, explain
- persuade
- sell
- share
- entertain?

Bias

A source that is biased may still be useful. Balance your own argument with information from credible sources with different viewpoints. But consider:

- Does the author use stereotypes, generalisations, or exaggeration?
- Is it a commercial site? Is it trying to sell you something? What is its message?
- Does the author or organisation have a political, commercial, or philosophical purpose?
- Are there other points of view?
- Does it present a balance of views?
- Does the web page provide links to other sites that can back it up?
- Despite bias, is the information still credible and useful?

Currency

Does the issue/topic you are researching require up-to-date information? (Are you researching historical or recent events?)

If so,

- Is the information outdated?
- Is there a date on the article?
- When was the page last updated?
- Are the links still active?
- Is the site well maintained? Look for current news, dates, etc.

Exploring Tech 10 Relevance

- ❑ Are the first few lines (which are picked up by search engines) describing the page relevant to your topic?
- ❑ Can you understand the text?
- ❑ Does the information help to answer your research question?
- ❑ Do the links take you to relevant information?
- ❑ Are there clear guides to the content?

Using Your Evaluated Source

Use the checklist on the following page to sum up your evaluation.

Once you have established that the material is useful, you can feed it into your work in appropriate ways, such as by:

- quoting
 - Use direct quotations only to support or illustrate important points that you are making.
 - Merely quoting large amounts of work will reduce the amount of your work that can be assessed.
- paraphrasing — putting your research sources and notes aside, ask yourself ‘Yes, but what is he/she actually saying?’ Use your own words.
- conversion into a different format (e.g. diagram, chart).

Always acknowledge your sources, whether quoting, paraphrasing, or converting to a different format. In this way, you become a credible source and avoid plagiarising someone else. For information on referencing return to the research advice page.

Bibliography

Barker, J., 2005, *Evaluating web pages: Techniques to apply & questions to ask*, [2005], UC Berkeley Teaching Library Internet Workshops, <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Evaluate.html>, accessed 11 January 2010.

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Evaluating web information, [2005], University of North Carolina, Asheville, <http://www.lib.unca.edu/library/lr/evalweb.html>

Evaluating websites: Criteria for the classroom, 2007, Lesley University, http://www.lesley.edu/library/guides/research/evaluating_web.html, accessed 11 January 2010.

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Checklist

Responsibility

Recording the following information will help you to acknowledge your sources and write a reference list for your research.

URL _____

Author _____

Title _____

Format _____ Publisher _____

Place _____ Date _____

Date accessed _____

Relevant Yes/No

Recording the following information will enable you to evaluate your source and decide whether, and how, to use it.

Type of site		
<input type="checkbox"/> Commercial site		<input type="checkbox"/> News or journalistic site
<input type="checkbox"/> Educational institution		<input type="checkbox"/> Professional site
<input type="checkbox"/> Government site		<input type="checkbox"/> Special interest site
<input type="checkbox"/> Personal page (home page, social networking page, blog, etc.)		<input type="checkbox"/> Other
Credible	Yes/No	Author/organisation is qualified, legitimate, contactable The information is verifiable Care has been taken in producing the document
Biased	Yes/No	
Still useful	Yes/No	
Current	Yes/No/Not relevant	