Information Literacy
Internet Research Skills:
II. Evaluation and Citation

Evaluation

One of the main purposes of evaluating online materials is to judge how trustworthy or reliable sources they are. A second purpose is to identify the sort of information which is immediately obvious in print publications -information about the publisher and author. This information is essential if you are to cite online materials accurately. What follows is a series of checklists to help you assess authority, accuracy, objectivity, currency and quality.

- **Authority**

The author, the organization or institution he or she is associated with and the publisher of the work are the main sources of authority for print publications. Details for each of these are usually provided in print publications. On a web page, the author, organization and publisher can easily be combined in one person and they can often be quite difficult to identify. There are several questions one can ask.

1. Is it clear who is responsible for the document?

That may be an individual author, an organization or the website owners or publishers. If you can't find this information on the document you're looking at, check if it's available on the front page for that site. The author of a website or blog may simply have copied and pasted information from somewhere else. He or she may well have altered it and given incorrect information about it. In this case you need to track down the original.

2. Is there any information about the person or organization responsible for the page?

Is there any information that would help you to make a judgment about how reliable the author is? In print publications the very fact that a book has been published by a well-established publisher with a good reputation, or has been written by someone with a qualification in the subject they're writing on, lends it credibility. If you're unsure of the quality of the page, you might look to see if any information has been provided about the author or the organization.

3. Is there a copyright statement?

In the absence of a clear statement of who the author is, a copyright statement provides an alternative indication of who is responsible for the document. However, you may not find a copyright statement because materials are automatically copyrighted to their author regardless of whether they include a copyright statement or not.

4. Does it have a print counterpart that reinforces its authority?

Print documents in general are regarded as more reliable than web documents. If a web document also has a print version, that is, if it has appeared in a print publication such as a book, journal or newspaper, it reinforces its authority.

- **Accuracy**

There are several questions users can ask to assure themselves of the accuracy of sources.

1. Are sources clearly listed so they can be verified?

This is a fundamental requirement of academic literature, in the form of footnotes and bibliographies. Although you can't expect non-academic documents to follow academic footnoting conventions, you can usefully pose this question of all documents. You can use it as a measure of the quality and reliability of advocacy documents in particular.

2. Is there an editorial input?

An editor provides an extra layer of quality control which should lead to increased accuracy. Most print publications go through an editorial process.

3. Are spelling and grammar correct?

You should be careful not to place too much weight on spelling and grammar. Minor errors creep into virtually every publication. However, poor spelling and grammar can indicate a

certain carelessness that might affect the document in other ways. If an author has his or her spelling wrong, then maybe they have some of the facts wrong too.

- **Objectivity**

It is unrealistic to expect anyone writing on the human and the social world in which all of us are immersed to be detached and objective about their subject. The aspiration to objectivity, however impossible it may be to achieve, is a traditional value of academic research. In practical terms it means that you should not allow your personal preferences to interfere with your research, that you should not distort evidence, that you should not make claims based on weak evidence and you should not deliberately omit evidence. You are entitled to expect academic documents to make more of an attempt at objectivity than, for example, advocacy documents. But just because a document doesn't attempt to be objective doesn't render it worthless. The questions below can usefully be applied to a wide range of documents.

1. **Are biases and affiliations clearly stated?**

You can expect that an advocacy document will advocate a particular position. The real problem arises when they do not make this clear.

2. **Is advertising clearly differentiated from information?**

Advertisers often try to present ads in the form of newspaper articles or research findings to give them more credibility. This is deliberately misleading and seriously undermines the credibility of a document.

- **Currency**

Currency means checking the date when the document was produced or last updated to see how up to date it is. In many cases it's not important to the researcher that a document is current. However, it's still important to identify the date when a document was produced. It identifies the historical context for the document. Thus, it's important to know whether a document dealing with the Second World War was produced in the midst of the war, shortly after it or many years later. The period in which it was produced will have a powerful influence on the document, and knowing the date will help you to understand the document. Here are some questions to be aware of.

1. **If the document has a print counterpart, is there a date of publication for that?**

If there is a print counterpart, and the web version is an unaltered copy of the print version, then the date of the print publication is the only significant date.

2. **Are there dates for when the document was first produced or first put on the Web?**

For a document with no print counterpart, the web document should indicate when it was first published.

3. **Are there dates for when the document was last updated or revised?**

For those documents that are regularly updated it's important to indicate which version you are referring to. The date when it was last updated also indicates how current and up to date the document is.

Evaluating e-mail Messages

It can be tricky to assess the reliability of email messages as research sources. Personal messages stand on their own merits. You place as much reliability on them as you would on the person who sent them. The same applies to messages sent via email distribution lists by organizations and institutions. You trust them as much as you trust the sender. Things become more difficult when you're dealing with forwarded messages. People often forward by email news stories or other items they've gleaned from the web. In some cases people edit or alter the stories to highlight the section they want to bring to your attention. In many cases, though, people edit to make news reports appear more favourable to their argument or political position. Be very careful of quoting from an item that has been forwarded to you in the body of an email message. If it's an attachment it's a little less likely to have been altered. You need to check the original and cite the original wherever possible.

Citation

The central purposes of citation are to acknowledge your sources, to provide information about the sources that help us to understand the context in which they were produced (such as date, publisher and author), and to make it possible for the reader to track down and consult the original sources. When you cite online sources, you need to bear in mind these core purposes. A URL on its own does not acknowledge the author, does not provide much information about the source and is often not sufficient to guide a reader back to the original source. Authors

change their web pages. They move them to new URLs. They delete them. No matter how carefully you cite Internet sources you can never guarantee that your reader will be able to access those sources. You can insure yourself against the disappearance of your sources by systematically saving and/or printing copies of all of the online sources you plan to cite. Make sure the date and URL are included on printouts.

If you can't properly cite the materials you use, if you can't mark out a path that will allow the reader to find the original sources you're referring to, they'll be entitled to be sceptical of those sources. The very fact that you will be able to assess and cite web documents according to rigorous academic standards is the most powerful argument you can have against the scepticism of those who are suspicious of any Internet-based source.