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| **Identifying Reliable Internet Sources**

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| Developing a [keen](http://mason.gmu.edu/~montecin/web-eval-sites.htm) sense of the credibility of sources, based on such clues as connection of author to the [subject](http://mason.gmu.edu/~montecin/web-eval-sites.htm), audience, source of publication, and documentation of supporting evidence,  can also help you evaluate print and other types of sources.  Though  many search engines rank material according to their idea of what is relevant, that doesn't mean the material is relevant to want you want or  is reliable. These guidelines are to help you become familiar with various types of Web resources and the reliability of the information.  **1**. Is there any evidence that the author of the Web information has some authority in the field about which she or he is providing information? What are the author's qualifications, credentials and connections to the subject?  **2**. With what organization or institution is the author associated? Is there a link to the sponsoring organization, a contact number and/or address or e-mail contact? A link to an association does not necessarily mean that the organization approved the content.  **3**. Does the author have publications in peer reviewed (scholarly and professional) publications, on the Web or in hard copy? (If an author does not have peer reviewed articles published, this does not mean that she or he does not have credible information, only that there has been no professional "test" of the author's authority on that subject.)  **4**. Are there clues that the author/s are biased? For example, is he/she selling or promoting a product? Is the author taking a personal stand on a social/political issue or is the author being objective ? Bias is not necessarily "bad," but the connections should be clear.  **5.** Is the Web information current? If there are a number of out-of-date links that do not work or old news, what does this say about the credibility of the information? **6.** Does the information have a complete list of works cited, which reference credible, authoritative sources? If the information is not backed up with sources, what is the author's relationship to the subject to be able to give an "expert" opinion?  **7.** Can the subject you are researching be fully covered with WWW sources or should print sources provide balance? Much scholarly research is still only available in traditional print form. It is safe to assume that if you have limited background in a topic and have a limited amount of time to do your research, you may not be able to get the most representative material on the subject. So be wary of making unsupportable conclusions based on a narrow range of sources.  **8.** On what kind of Web site does the information appear? The site can give you clues about the credibility of the source. **Here are some types of Web sites:** * **Personal Home Pages** - maintained by individuals. They are often informal. Individuals can post their resumes, link to favorite sites, showcase their interests and ideas. Some personal Web sites also serve as professional sites. For example, many professors publish their syllabi, course material and, in some cases, their scholarship, on their personal Web pages. Entrepreneurs often advertise their services on "home" pages.
* **Special interest sites** - maintained by non-profit organizations or activists dealing with special issues, such as environmental concerns, legalization of marijuana, etc. They can be relatively mainstream or radical in interests and vary widely in credibility of information. Special interest sites are, by their nature, biased. When using such sources, your readers should be aware of the source's special interest.
* **Professional sites** - maintained by institutions/organizations, sometimes by individuals. They can include research, reference sources, fact sheets. Many institutions provide such services to the public. The credibility of the institution or professional credential of the individual providing the facts gives clues as to the reliability of the information. Is the site just linking to sources? If so, the credibility of the information is connected to the originating sites.
* **News and Journalistic sites** (E-zines) - which include national, international news, online newspapers, magazines, and "homegrown" Web publications. Anyone can publish his or her own "news," on the Web. What do you know about, or what can you find out about, the reputation of the periodical? Is it an electronic version of a credible print publication? As in print - just because information is published does not necessarily mean it is true. If a periodical article has an ISSN number (International Standard Serial Number), it will probably have more authority.
* **Commercial sites** - Although many legitimate businesses have Websites, some are not legitimate. Companies, with good and bad reputations, are in the business of making money and acquiring and keeping customers. They are naturally biased in favor of their own products, so watch out for inflated claims for performance and quality. Companies will not showcase their competitors' products. If you are, for example, comparing products, get impartial reviews, not company information. Many entrepreneurs use "rented" Web space to create their own Web sites to sell their services or products - buyer beware! Can you track the reputation of the company?

**9.** Deconstruct the Web address (URL) to find out the source of the information (and the server on which it resides). What do the different parts of a URL, divided by "/" symbols mean? URL addresses are hierarchical. For example, the URL address:   "**http://www.gmu.edu/facstaff/policy/administrative/60.html**", broken down into its components, is (from the lowest to highest): the file "University Policy #60" - Responsible Use of Computing ("**60.html**"), is linked in a Web page called "University Administration Policies"  ("**administrative**"). The "University Administration Policies" page is linked on a Web page called the "Faculty/Staff  Information" ("**facstaff**"), which a link on MasonLink the GMU home page, which server is called: "**www.gmu.edu**."  Web sites serve different purposes. There are reliable and unreliable Web sites in most categories of Web sites. A personal Web site, which expresses the interests and biases of its author, is a legitimate use of a Web site, as long as the Web site owner is up front about his or her identity. Like any other source, the authority of the author helps determine the value of the information. Be wary of sites which publish information without letting you know if the information is a personal viewpoint.  If the information is not a personal viewpoint, does the author tell you the original source?  Is the original source credible? Web sites can masquerade as one type but may have a hidden agenda. Any group can give itself an official sounding name or logo. |

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| **Some Common Domain Names** |
| **.edu** - education sites |
| **.gov -** government sites |
| **.org -** organization sites |
| **.com -** commercial sites |
| **.net -** network infrastructures |

"Helpful Hints to Help You Evaluate the Credibility of WebResources." *Mason Academic Research System (mason.gmu.edu)*. Web. 05 Dec. 2011. <http://mason.gmu.edu/~montecin/web-eval-sites.htm>.