

Finding Information on the Internet: A Tutorial

<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Evaluate.html>

Evaluating Web Pages: Techniques to Apply & Questions to Ask

UC Berkeley - Teaching Library Internet Workshops

[About This Tutorial](#) | [Table of Contents](#) | [Handouts](#) | [Glossary](#)

Looking for the [old Evaluate.html](#) page with the rationale and sample links to try?
Looking for the [Web Page Evaluation Checklist PDF form?](#)

Evaluating web pages skillfully requires you to do two things at once:

1. Train your eye and your fingers to employ a series of **techniques** that help you quickly find what you need to know about web pages;
2. Train your mind to think critically, even suspiciously, by **asking a series of questions** that will help you decide how much a web page is to be trusted.

This page is organized to combine the two techniques into a process that begins with looking at your search results from a search engine or other source, follows through by investigating the content of page, and extends beyond the page to what others may say about the page or its author(s).

1. What can the URL tell you?

Techniques for Web Evaluation :

1. Before you leave the list of search results -- before you click and get interested in anything written on the page -- glean all you can from the URLs of each page.
2. Choose pages most likely to be reliable and authentic.

Questions to ask:

Is it somebody's [personal page](#)?

- Read the [URL](#)* carefully:
 - Look for a personal name (e.g., *jbarker* or *barker*) following a tilde (~), a percent sign (%), or the words "users," "members," or "people."
 - Is the server a commercial [ISP](#)* or other provider mostly of web page hosting (like aol.com or geocities.com)

*Click on [linked words](#) for term definitions in our online [Glossary](#).

What type of [domain](#) does it come from ?
(educational, nonprofit, commercial, government, etc.)

- Is the domain appropriate for the content?

What are the implications?

Personal pages are not necessarily "bad," but you need to investigate the author very carefully. For personal pages, there is no publisher or domain owner vouching for the information in the page.

Look for a appropriateness, fit. What kind of information source do you think is most reliable for your topic?

- Government sites: look for .gov, .mil, .us, or other country code
- Educational sites: look for .edu
- Nonprofit organizations: look for .org
- If from a foreign country, look at the country code and read the page to be sure who published it.

Is it published by an entity that makes sense?
Who "published" the page?

You can rely more on information that is published by the source:

- In general, the publisher is the agency or person operating the "server" computer from which the document is issued.
 - The server is usually named in first portion of the URL (between *http://* and the first */*)
- Have you heard of this entity before?
- Does it correspond the name of the site? Should it?

- Look for New York Times news from **www.nytimes.com**
- Look for health information from any of the agencies of the National Institute of Health on sites with **nih** somewhere in the domain name.

2. Scan the perimeter of the page, looking for answers to these questions:

Techniques for Web Evaluation :

1. Look for links that say "**About us**," "**Philosophy**," "**Background**," "**Biography**," "**Who am I**," etc.
2. If you cannot find any links like these, you can often find this kind of information if you **Truncate back the URL**.

INSTRUCTIONS for Truncating back a URL: In the top Location Box, delete the end characters of the URL stopping just before each / (leave the slash). Press enter to see if you can see more about the author or the origins/nature of the site providing the page.

Continue this process, one slash (/) at a time, until you reach the first single / which is preceded by the domain name portion. This is the page's server or "publisher."

3. Look for the date "last updated" - usually at the bottom of a web page. Check the date on all the pages on the site. Do not rely on a date given in IE's File|Properties or Netscape's View|Page Info displays. These dates can be automatically kept current and are useless in critical evaluation.

Questions to ask:

Who wrote the page?

- Look for the name of the author, or the name of the organization, institution, agency, or whatever who is responsible for the page
 - An e-mail contact is not enough
- If there is no personal author, look for an agency or organization that claims

What are the implications?

Web pages are all created with a purpose in mind by some person or agency or entity. They do not simply "grow" on the web like mildew grows in moist corners.

You are looking for someone who claims accountability and responsibility for the

responsibility for the page.

- If you cannot find this, locate the publisher by truncating back the URL (see technique above). Does this publisher claim responsibility for the content? Does it explain why the page exists in any way?

Is the page dated? Is it current enough?

- Is it "stale" or "dusty" information on a time-sensitive or evolving topic?
- **CAUTION:** Undated factual or statistical information is no better than anonymous information. Don't use it.

What are the author's credentials on this subject?

- Does his background or education qualify him to write on this topic?
- Does he seem to be a just a hobbyist, self-proclaimed expert, or enthusiast?
 - Is the page merely an opinion? Is there any reason you should believe him more than anyone else?
 - Is the page a rant, an extreme view, possibly distorted or exaggerated?
- If you cannot find strong, relevant credentials, look very closely at documentation of sources (next section).

content.

An email address with no additional information about the author is not sufficient for assessing the author's credentials.

If this is all you have, try e-mailing the author and asking politely for more information about him/her.

How recent the date needs to be depends on your needs.

For some topics you want current information.

For others, you want information put on the web near the time it became known.

In some cases, the importance of the date is to tell you whether the page author is still maintaining an interest in the page, or has abandoned it.

Anyone can put anything on the web for pennies in just a few minutes. Your task is to distinguish between the reliable and questionable.

Many web pages are opinion pieces offered in a vast public forum.

You should hold the author to the same degree of credentials, authority, and documentation that you would expect from something published in a reputable print resource (book, journal article, good newspaper).

3. Look for indicators of quality information:

Techniques for Web Evaluation :

1. Look for a link called "links," "additional sites," "related links," etc.
2. In the text, if you see little footnote numbers or links that might refer to documentation, take the time to explore them.
 - What kinds of publications or sites are they? Reputable? Scholarly?
 - Are they real? On the web (where no publisher is editing most pages), it is possible to create totally fake references.
3. Look at the publisher of the page (first part of the URL).
 - Expect a journal article, newspaper article, and some other publications that are recent

to come from the original publisher IF the publication is available on the web. Look at the bottom of such articles for copyright information or permissions to reproduce.

Questions to ask:

Are sources documented with footnotes or links?

- Where did the author get the information?
 - As in published scholarly/academic journals and books, you should expect documentation.
- If there are links to other pages as sources, are they to reliable sources?
- Do the links work?

If reproduced information (from another source), is it complete, not altered, not fake or forged?

- Is it retyped? If so, it could easily be altered.
- Is it reproduced from another publication?
 - Are permissions to reproduce and copyright information provided?
 - Is there a reason there are not links to the original source if it is online (instead of reproducing it)?

Are there links to other resources on the topic?

- Are the links well chosen, well organized, and/or evaluated/annotated?
- Do the links work?
- Do the links represent other viewpoints?
- Do the links (or absence of other viewpoints)

What are the implications?

In scholarly/research work, the credibility of most writings is proven through footnote documentation or other means of revealing the sources of information. Saying what you believe without documentation is not much better than just expressing an opinion or a point of view. What credibility does your research need?

An exception can be journalism from highly reputable newspapers. But these are not scholarly. Check with your instructor before using this type of material.

Links that don't work or are to other weak or fringe pages do not help strengthen the credibility of your research.

You may have to find the original to be sure a copy of something is not altered and is complete.

Look at the URL: is it from the original source?

If you find a legitimate article from a reputable journal or other publication, it should be accompanied by the copyright statement and/or permission to reprint. If it is not, be suspicious.

Try to find the source. If the URL of the document is not to the original source, it is likely that it is illegally reproduced, and the text could be altered, even with the copyright information present.

Many well developed pages offer links to other pages on the same topic that they consider worthwhile. They are inviting you compare their information with other pages. Links that offer opposing

indicate a bias?

viewpoints as well as their own are more likely to be balanced and unbiased than pages that offer only one view. Anything not said that could be said? And perhaps would be said if all points of view were represented? Always look for bias.

Especially when you agree with something, check for bias.

4. What do others say?

Techniques for Web Evaluation :

1. Find out what other web pages link to this page.

Do a **link:** search in Google, AltaVista, or another search engine where this can be done.

INSTRUCTIONS for doing a **link:** search in Google or AltaVista:

1. Copy the URL of the page you are investigating (Ctrl+C in Windows).
2. Go to the search engine site, and type **link:** in the search box.
3. Paste the URL of the investigated site into the search box immediately following **link:** (no space after the colon). Submit the search.

The pages listed all contain one or more links to the page you are looking for.

If you find no links, try a shorter portion of the URL, stopping after each /.

2. Look the page up in a reputable [directory](#) that evaluates its contents ([Librarians' Index](#), [Infomine](#), [About.com](#), [AcademicInfo](#), or a specialized directory you trust).

INSTRUCTIONS: Go to the directory and search for the title of the site you are investigating. Look for the publisher if you can't find a specific page from a larger site.

3. Look up the author's name in [Google](#) (or another [directory that supports this](#)).

INSTRUCTIONS in Google: Search the name three ways:

- a. without quotes - **Jabberwocky Webauthor**
- b. enclosed in quotes as a phrase - **"Jabberwocky Webauthor"**
- c. enclosed in quotes with * between the first and last name - **"Jabberwocky * Webauthor"** (The * can stand for any middle initial or name in Google only).

Questions to ask:

Who links to the page?

- Are there many links?
- What kinds of sites link to it?
- What do they say?
- Are any of them directories? Try looking at what directories say.

What are the implications?

Sometimes a page is linked to only by other parts of its own site (not much of a recommendation).

Sometimes a page is linked to by its fan club, and by detractors. Read both points of view.

If a page or its site is in a bona fide directory, think about whether there is much critical evaluation of the links in the directory.

Is the page listed in one or more reputable directories or pages?

Good directories include a tiny fraction of the web, and inclusion in a directory is therefore noteworthy.

But read what the directory says! It may not be 100% positive.

What do others say about the author or responsible authoring body?

"Googling someone" (new term for this) can be revealing. Be sure to consider the source. If the viewpoint is radical or controversial, expect to find detractors. Think critically about all points of view.

5. Does it all add up?

Techniques for Web Evaluation :

1. Step back and think about all you have learned about the page. Listen to your gut reaction. Think about why the page was created, the intentions of its author(s).
If you have doubts, ask your instructor or come to one of the library reference desks and ask for advice.
2. Be sensitive to the possibility that you are the victim of irony, spoof, fraud, or other falsehood.
3. Ask yourself if the web is truly the best place to find resources for the research you are doing.

Questions to ask:

So what? What are the implications?

Why was the page put on the web?

These are some of the reasons to think of. The web is a public place, open to all. You need to be aware of the entire range of human possibilities of intentions behind web pages.

- Inform, give facts, give data?
- Explain, persuade?
- Sell, entice?
- Share?
- Disclose?

Might it be ironic? Satire or parody?

It is easy to be fooled, and this can make you look foolish in turn.

- Think about the "tone" of the page.
- Humorous? Parody? Exaggerated? Overblown arguments?
- Outrageous photographs or juxtaposition of unlikely images?
- Arguing a viewpoint with examples that suggest that what is argued is ultimately not possible.

Is this as good as resources I could find if I used the library, or some of the web-based

What is your requirement (or your instructor's requirement) for

indexes available through the library, or other print resources?

- Are you being completely fair? Too harsh? Totally objective? Requiring the same degree of "proof" you would from a print publication?
- Is the site good for some things and not for others?
- Are your hopes biasing your interpretation?

the quality of reliability of your information?

In general, published information is considered more reliable than what is on the web. But many, many reputable agencies and publishers make great stuff available by "publishing" it on the web. This applies to most governments, most institutions and societies, many publishing houses and news sources.

But take the time to check it out.

More About Evaluating Web Sources

- [Evaluating Information Found on the Internet](http://www.library.jhu.edu/elp/useit/evaluate/)
<<http://www.library.jhu.edu/elp/useit/evaluate/>>
An excellent series of pages on this subject (from the Milton Library at Johns Hopkins University).
- [Critical Evaluation of Resources](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Evaluation.html)
<<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Evaluation.html>>
A broader, more theoretical look at the criteria and importance of evaluating all types of resources (also from the UC Berkeley Teaching Library).
- For annotated descriptions of many other good guides to evaluating web pages, search the subject "[Evaluation of Internet Resources](#)" in the [Librarians' Index to the Internet](#)
<<http://www.lli.org>>.

Quick Links

Evaluating Web Pages: [Exericises: Experience Why It's Important](#) | [Techniques to App](#)
[Questions to Ask](#) | [Hints & Tips](#)

[HELP/FAQ](#) [CATALOGS](#) [COMMENTS](#) [HOME](#)

Copyright (C) 2003 by the Library, University of California, Berkeley. All rights reserved.
Document created & maintained on server: <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/> by [Joe Barker](#)
Last update 6January2003. Server manager: webman@library.berkeley.edu