**Choosing Credible Sources**

When a writer uses a book or published article as a source in a research paper, there are not many questions to ask about the credibility of that source. Many editors have gone through the evaluation process before publication. Using books and the library databases as your first line of research options is a good strategy.

The Web, however, is different. Anyone can put any information on the Web, and sometimes information looks more credible at first glance than it is on closer inspection. Ask yourself, "Is this source credible?" every time you choose a Web source. This is especially true of sources with no author or organizational affiliation. You will likely have to navigate to the homepage of the site to judge its credibility. From a single page within a site, it is difficult to determine much about it. Traveling to the home page will yield much more useful information.

One smart way to use the Web is to begin with sources you know are credible. For example, imagine an essay about blood donation. The writer could Google "blood donation," which would result in any number of pages with various degrees of credibility. Or, the writer could think about what organizations might have good information about the topic, such as the Red Cross, the Mayo Clinic, or the National Institutes of Health. The writer could travel to those Web sites and look for information there first without much fear of coming across poor quality information.

**Ways to Determine Credibility**

Home page

Always look at the home page, or main page, of any Web site. Look for a link that says "home" or enter the Web address only through the domain name. For example, if you were on the page  http://www.amnesty.org/en/demand-dignity, you would delete the information from the end to result in http://www.amnesty.org. On the home page, you can find more information. Especially check out the "About Us" link, which will sometimes reveal the author or sponsor.

Author

Look for who the author is and what you can find out about that person or organization. What are the author's qualifications? If there is no author, think twice before using the source.

Sponsor

Look for who owns the site. Is it a reputable group or organization? If so, that is a good sign, even if no individual author is listed. If you cannot tell what group or individual developed the site, think twice before using the source.

Date

Is the information current? For many disciplines, the currency of information is vital.

Documentation

Does the source tell readers where its facts are from? If the source mentions many details or statistics with no documentation, be wary.

Type of site

Determine the type of site you are considering.

Is it a database or other site recommended by the library? Sources retrieved through Jacobs Library are credible.

Is this a blog or homepage owned by an individual person? If so, you want to avoid it unless you can verify the person's credentials.

Is it a wiki? A wiki is a Web site where any user can modify the information, and thus there is no way to verify authorship. Examples of wikis include Wikipedia, Wiktionary, and Wikiquotes. These sources may provide a general overview or lead to more credible sources, but avoid using them in an essay.

Is it an online periodical or online version of a print publication? Examples of online periodicals include Slate.com, Salon.com, and Wired.com, and examples of print publications on the Web include Nytimes.com and Newsweek.com. If you are using a periodical on the Web, you can feel more secure.

**Ways *Not* to Determine Credibility**

Search engine

Do not assume that the top results from a search engine list are necessarily credible. Search engines have different methods for organizing and ordering results. You are likely just looking at the most popular results, not the best ones.

.org or .edu

Do not rely on just the domain type to determine credibility. Anyone can begin their own .org Web site; the .org itself does not indicate the quality of the source. Many pages on .edu domains are created by students and are thus not the best sources to cite.

### What type of evidence should I use?

There are two types of evidence.

First hand research is research you have conducted yourself such as interviews, experiments, surveys, or personal experience and anecdotes.

Second hand research is research you are getting from various texts that has been supplied and compiled by others such as books, periodicals, and Web sites.

Regardless of what type of sources you use, they must be credible. In other words, your sources must be reliable, accurate, and trustworthy.

### How do I know if a source is credible?

You can ask the following questions to determine if a source is credible.

**Who is the author?** Credible sources are written by authors respected in their fields of study. Responsible, credible authors will cite their sources so that you can check the accuracy of and support for what they've written. (This is also a good way to find more sources for your own research.)

**How recent is the source?** The choice to seek recent sources depends on your topic. While sources on the American Civil War may be decades old and still contain accurate information, sources on information technologies, or other areas that are experiencing rapid changes, need to be much more current.

**What is the author's purpose?** When deciding which sources to use, you should take the purpose or point of view of the author into consideration. Is the author presenting a neutral, objective view of a topic? Or is the author advocating one specific view of a topic? Who is funding the research or writing of this source? A source written from a particular point of view **may** be credible; however, you need to be careful that your sources don't limit your coverage of a topic to one side of a debate.

**What type of sources does your audience value?** If you are writing for a professional or academic audience, they may value peer-reviewed journals as the most credible sources of information. If you are writing for a group of residents in your hometown, they might be more comfortable with mainstream sources, such as Time or Newsweek. A younger audience may be more accepting of information found on the Internet than an older audience might be.

**Be especially careful when evaluating Internet sources!**Never use Web sites where an author cannot be determined, unless the site is associated with a reputable institution such as a respected university, a credible media outlet, government program or department, or well-known non-governmental organizations. Beware of using sites like Wikipedia, which are collaboratively developed by users. Because anyone can add or change content, the validity of information on such sites may not meet the standards for academic research.

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| **Criteria to Evaluate the Credibility of WWW Resources**   |  | | --- | | Anyone, in theory, can publish on the Web; therefore, it is imperative for users of the Web to develop a critical eye to evaluate the credibility of Internet information. Searching for sources on the WWW involves using a search engine, a directory, or some combination of these two. Because there is so much information on the Web, good and bad, finding what you want is not an exact science and can be time consuming. According to Nicholas C. Burbules, "....the Web is not an ordinary reference system; it poses some unique and, in many respects, unprecedented conditions that complicate the task of sorting out dependable from undependable information--and even complicates the notion that we have a clear sense of that distinction. How to differentiate credible from fraudulent information is not a new problem, but unraveling these in the context of a vast rapidly changing networked system is" (Paradoxes of the Web: The Ethical Dimensions of Credibility, Library Trends, Wntr 2001 v49 i3 p441, Introduction).  Developing a keen sense of the credibility of sources, based on such clues as connection of author to the subject, 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 |
| There are other extensions, such as the abbreviation of a country, ie.**.jp**for Japan |

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| The Internet addresses (Domain Names), which end in such extensions as those above, correlate to the server which Is the "home base" for that Internet address. It gets confusing when dealing with personal Web pages. Independent providers, such as AOL, are not responsible for the content of individual's Web pages, anymore than a university is responsible for the Web pages of students (Though, in extreme cases, you can be cut off if your content does not fit certain standards). If a person named "Doe" had a Web page on America Online, the address might be http://www.erols.com/doe/. Even though the site is commercial (AOL), Mr./Ms. Doe has bought Web space for a personal Web page. Some universities, like GMU, provide Web space to faculty and student, so personal Web pages can reside on an education site. |

# Evaluating the Credibility of Your Sources

Remember, your use of sources is a means of supporting the argument you make. This means that the sources you reference need to be credible and authoritative. How do you know that your sources are of value? Ask yourself the following questions:

### Where was the source published?

* Is it in a peer-reviewed scholarly journal (i.e. an article that is evaluated by other experts in the field) or published by a university press, professional society, or scientific publisher (all of which also operate peer-review processes)? These texts will have scholarly credibility.
* Was the source published on-line? This is not necessarily bad, but it will depend on who published it, why it was published, and how you intend to use the material. For example, there are on-line journals that utilize peer-review thus providing greater credibility to the publication. But there are many articles published under the guise of scholarly work, by individuals claiming expertise but which are of highly questionable credibility. If you have doubts about an on-line source, you can discuss it with your instructor or TA and you can elect not to use it.

### Who wrote it?

* You can undertake brief on-line research into the author. Is the author affiliated with a university or another institution? What else has the author written? Citation databases will also tell you the number of times this source has been cited by other academics, giving you further insight into its credibility.

### Is the piece timely and appropriate for its field?

* In some disciplines, material can become outdated very swiftly. In others, texts can continue to be considered valuable for longer. You should search for additional texts on the topic to find related sources, sources in which this source is cited, and sources that cite this source in order to get a stronger picture of its intellectual relevance and value.

### For whom is the source written?

* Is the intended audience a scholarly one? If so, it should have a clear bibliography that you will also be able to consult for further sources.

### Will you use the source as a primary or secondary text?

* If the material does not measure up to expected standards of scholarly work, it may still be of use to you. But as a primary text – that is to say, a text that needs to be analyzed – rather than a secondary text – which is a text that might support your argument or provide a theoretical framework for your analysis, for example.