Evaluating Quality Start Page

EVALUATING THE QUALITY OF INFORMATION ON THE INTERNET: A CHECKLIST
by Genie Tyburski

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Determine Objectivity.

Lack of objectivity does not necessarily mean a source provides substandard information. To the contrary, a Web page may use unimpeachable data to influence readers. Review all quality evaluation criteria -- objectivity, timeliness, accuracy, and authority -- when judging information. Beware of partiality; identify intent.

Identify the Web site's owners and, if relevant, its sponsors.

- Use Whois, a database of domain name registrations. Because each registrar maintains its own Whois database, thorough research may require that you search each one. Find these databases by connecting to the Web site of each accredited registrar. For Web sites registered outside the U.S., connect to the registrar in the respective country. Start here.
- Review the site's About Us statement.
- Independently verify ownership/sponsorship information found at the site.
Discover the companies, non-profit organizations, and research institutions that fund medical and scientific research. The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) offers Integrity in Science, a database of information about scientists and medical researchers with ties to companies, educational institutions, or non-profit organizations.

Learn about codes and symbols that denote hate from the Anti-Defamation League's Hate on Display database.

Learn to recognize the growing influence of hate on the Web. Review the Anti-Defamation League's Alex Curtis: 'Lone Wolf' of Hate Prowls the Internet.

Locate and read a site's purpose statement. Distinguish serious intent from humor.

Beware of advertising that influences content.

Review these examples:

- Read The Virtual Chase's purpose statement.
- See a purpose statement with objective intent.
- Examine a purpose statement with biased intent.
- Examine persuasive use of Web-based media.
- Examine a Web site with humorous intent. Here’s another site with humorous intent.
- See a dot gov site whose intent is humor.
- Review a site that offers information to promote the sale of a product.
- Review another example of a site whose advertising influences its content.
- Examine additional examples from the Teaching Web, Government Resources on the Internet.

Read the Site Documentation.

This advice especially applies to web sites offering primary documents, copyrighted works, works in the public domain, databases, or commentary.

Determine all that apply:

- Data source
- Differences between Web and print editions with same or similar titles
- Extent, if any, of editorial enhancements
- Method of conversion
- Updating schedule and method
- Individuals or entity responsible for information supplied by the site
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◆ Review these examples:

- Read detailed documentation about the development of the PubMed database.
- Read The Avalon Project's information about how the documents go online.
- Examine site documentation for New York State Consolidated Laws at FindLaw. Can you find it? Can you identify the status of the law?

Ascertain author or publisher credentials.

Know the identity and expertise of the individual(s) or business(es) behind a site.

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◆ Discover whether the source is a reputable publisher.

- Is the publisher a familiar name? If not, does it provide verifiable evidence of its competency? Look for citations to previously published works, a corporate profile, and information about editorial standards.
- Does the publisher have a bias? (See checklist item #1 on objectivity.) Know the media’s business affiliations. Columbia Journalism Review publishes Who Owns What.

◆ Examine the author’s credentials. Is the author renowned? If not, does he supply an autobiography containing verifiable evidence of his authority on the subject? Does he offer a curriculum vita? Can you verify these credentials?
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◆ Review these examples:

- Examine the [National Association of Real Estate Investment Trust](#)'s informative corporate profile. Click on "About NAREIT."
- View John December's [excellent autobiography](#).
- Examine a site that [masks authorship](#). Can you detect the entity responsible for this site? Hint: Expand the Checklist item, [Determine Objectivity](#), for suggestions on discovering site ownership.
- Examine another site that [masks authorship](#). Discover the entity behind this site by clicking through three times.
- Examine a site that offers counseling for Internet addiction. An online questionnaire helps you determine whether or not you are addicted. If you are, receiving counseling. Online!
- Examine additional examples from the Teaching Web, Government Resources on the Internet.

Identify Citation Data.

Locate the author, title, and publisher of the document or information.

◆ Ascertain creation and revision dates. If the site revised its data, does it reveal what it modified? Are the changes substantive rather than cosmetic?
◆ Record the date on which you visit a page. Web pages come and go. Later you may have to document the availability of information that no longer resides where you found it.
◆ Review these examples:

- The [Home Page](#) of The Virtual Chase illustrates one way in which authors may date their Web pages.
- This [article on breast cancer](#) lacks dates.
- **Web Citation Machine**: This utility converts data you supply about a Web resource to an MLA-style bibliographic citation. It may be useful in determining whether a resource offers enough data about itself for citation purposes.

Verify All Information.

This suggestion pertains to all sources, whether well-known and reputable, or not.

◆ Confirm the document's or information's completeness and accuracy.

The Web site, Nursing Home Compare, neglects to include information about "more than 25,000 violations reported by state investigators."

Find two or more credible sources that say the same thing. If you think misinformation will fail to stump you, think again. Many journalists fall prey to misinformation time and again as evidenced in this article that begins with a story about bad Revolutionary War era information. It provides many more examples of erroneous information still residing in commercial databases because of their original publication in the news. Carl M. Cannon, "The Real Computer Virus," American Journalism Review, April 2001, http://ajr.newslink.org/ajrcarlapr01.html. Reviewed online on 10 April 2001, 25 May 2001. See also: "Working the Web: Gossip," The Guardian, 20 September 2001, reviewed online on 21 September 2001.


Discover the importance of verification by examining these sites:

- The White House and The White House
- George W. Bush and George W. Bush
- Consumer Warning Re Aspartame and Aspartame: No Danger
- Pol Pot Reconfirms Presence in Stockholm, Sweden
- ACLU Sues to Eliminate Senior Discounts
- Examine additional examples from the Teaching Web, Government Resources on the Internet.

Scan watch group alerts. Not all bogus sites will be easy to detect.