

Elements of Web Site Evaluation

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Start by asking: what's my information "neighborhood"? Am I looking for scholarly sources, opinions, personal information,... or something else?

Authority

- What are the author's credentials? Know when credentials matter.
- Is the source known and respected? Is there a way to contact the source?
- Are there "back door" ways of determining authority, like reviewer ratings?
- Does a high ranking on search engine results mean a source is authoritative?

Accuracy

- Can the information be corroborated? In other words, can you confirm the information in another source?
- Does the information need to be current?
- Is the information documented, either directly or indirectly?
- Is the information presented with integrity?
- Is accuracy a relevant criterion for the information neighborhood you are in?

Balanced Treatment

Be able to spot point of view

- Is the site fair and objective?
- Is it an advocacy site? Advocacy sites promote the interests of an organization, a cause, or a point-of-view, and are biased by definition.
- Is there a conflict of interest? Does the website producer stand to benefit from the information being provided?

How important is balance? Is it required for your purposes?

- Do hobbyists' sites, "fun" sites, and advocacy sites need to be unbiased?
- Is bias necessarily a bad thing?

Sample persuasion techniques

- Calling on a higher authority (e.g., religion, government, celebrity, the medical profession, etc.) to justify a position
- Using the "plain folks" technique ("We are just like everyone else") to elicit sympathy and understanding
- Employing pseudoscience - using scientific-sounding references to justify a position
- "Co-opting" symbols and traditions to use in other contexts
- "Cloaking" identity -- acting like something you are not