

Evaluating Resources

Background

In the past, most of the resources available to students were books and journals on the library shelves. These resources were published by academic publishing houses and then chosen by librarians to be in the library. At both stages the publishers and librarians used their expertise to ensure that the materials chosen contained information that was reliable and relevant.

With the development of the Internet, information can now be published on a website by anyone – individuals, companies or organisations – and there is no guarantee that the information presented is accurate. It is up to the student to ensure that the sources of the information being used are reliable and authoritative.

Evaluating

There are a number of questions you must ask yourself when deciding if a resource is suitable to be used in an assignment. These questions include:

Reliability of the Source: Is the author who they say they are?

For books and journals, publishers know the authors who are writing for them. Their identities have been verified. On a website, an author can claim to be someone else and there is no clear way to check that this is true.

Authority of the author: Does the author have any qualifications or recognised expertise to write about this topic?

In books and journal articles, it is usual that the academic qualifications of the author are listed as well as the academic institution with which s/he is connected. These are checked by the publishers.

On websites and blogs, *anyone* can say they have qualifications and write on any topic. There is no certainty that the information they give is accurate.

Validity of the information: Is the information based on proper scientific research?

Most academic books and journal articles have lists of references of the research on which the information is based. A reader can check this research to validate that the conclusions the author draws are reasonable.

A reliable web page would also have a list of references that could be checked. If there are no references or links to other sources, then you can't be sure that the information is valid.



Accuracy of the information: Is the information correct?

A reader of books and journal articles could find the sources on the reference list and check that the author has used information correctly.

A web page with no reference list may say things that sound correct but it is difficult to check and be certain.

Timeliness of the information: Is the information up to date?

Books and journal articles usually display the date of publication. However, it can be more difficult to find out the last time a website has been updated and the information could be out of date.

Evaluating Websites

Here are some techniques to help you decide if the information on a website is worth using.

1. Look at the URL

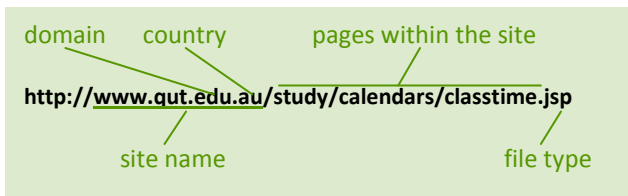


Figure 1

In Figure 1 above is the URL (Uniform Resource Locator or website address) of the class timetable at QUT. It shows the different parts of a URL.

The Domain

One important part of the URL you should look at is the domain. This indicates the type of organisation created the website.

Company or individual: .com or .co
 Government: .gov
 Non-profit organisation: .org
 Educational facility: .edu or .ac
 Military: .mil
 Association: .asn

Domain codes

Generally it is considered that websites with government, non-profit organisation or education domain codes would be most likely to be accurate. It is often best to avoid company or individual websites as they are not considered to be good sources for information for academic assignments.

The Publisher

The publisher is generally the organisation operating the computer (or 'server') which controls the website.

Often the publisher is part of the site name of the website. In the web address in Figure 1 the publisher is QUT.

You need to think about whether the publisher is a suitable source of information for your assignment and the point of view being put forward. You can sometimes get some idea of this if you look at links such as 'About Us', 'Background' or 'Philosophy'.

Sometimes you need to go back to the home page to find this information. There is often a 'Home' button on web pages or you may need to delete all the characters in the URL that come after the site name.



1. Look at the Web Page

There are a number of clues that you can look for on the actual web page you are evaluating.

The Author

Have a look to see who wrote the web page. If there is no personal author, look for an agency or organisation that claims ownership of the page. If not, find the publisher of the page by deleting everything except the site name in the URL.

What credentials does this author have to write about this topic? Are there any educational qualifications mentioned or membership of an organisation relevant to the topic? Look up the author in Google or Yahoo to find out more.

Don't be fooled by people who refer to themselves as 'Doctor'. This term can refer to all sorts of qualifications and may not be relevant to the information written on the web page.

ANYONE can put information onto a website. Don't trust information on the Net without checking it.

The Date

Is there a date on the page to indicate when it was written? If you can't find a date on the page check the bottom of the homepage (by clicking on home or deleting everything except the site name in the URL). Check at the bottom of the home page for a date the website was last updated.

Generally, for undergraduate assignments, you are looking for information which is as current as possible.

References and/or links

Is the information on the web page referenced? If so, what kind of references are they? Are they publications or other websites? Are they reputable and scholarly? Are they real? (It is possible to create fake references on the net. Check the titles or authors in Google or Google Scholar.)

Look for a link called 'links' or 'related links' or 'additional information'. Check to see if these links are scholarly and reputable. Check to see if the links work. Dead links are a sign that the website is not being maintained and therefore the information may be out of date.

If there are no references or links, or these are not scholarly, you have to be more cautious about the reliability of the information on the web page.

Purpose

Think about the purpose of the information on the web page. Is it to give information or persuade you to a point of view or sell something?

A website for a company or business is most likely to exist so that the business is able to sell something. Personal websites are often used by individuals to lay out their personal opinions on a subject and are not likely to be objective. Many websites are written as satires or parodies of other things in order to be humorous.



Formatting

You cannot assume that information taken from another source is reproduced on a web page accurately. If it has been retyped or reformatted, there is no way to tell if it has been changed. Try to find the original source and use that information directly.

It is often difficult to know what is real or not on a web page. However, looking for these clues will help you sift out the material that is most suitable for your assignments.

PHOTO REFERENCES

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