

Evaluating Sources – A Checklist for Electronic Resources

JOURNAL ARTICLES		WEB SITES
<p>Author Qualifications: Does the journal article clearly identify the author and his or her qualifications? If not, can you find additional information about the author online or in a print biographical source? How extensively has the author published in his or her field? What other articles has the author written and what topics are covered?</p> <p>Journal Qualities: What is the nature of the journal that has published the article? Is it an academic journal? Is it scholarly in nature? Is it published by a professional association? Are the articles in the journal refereed or peer reviewed? Does the journal have a solid publishing history? Are other articles in the journal frequently referenced by other experts in the field?</p>	<p>Authority</p>	<p>Author Qualifications: Is the author clearly identified? Are the author's credentials listed: degrees, occupation, professional training, etc.? Is there a link to author biographical information in the Web site? Does the author have any articles or books in print? How extensively has the author written on the subject covered in the Web site?</p>
<p>Verification Tools: AUTHORS: Biography & Genealogy Master Index (CT213.B5 and online via GaleInfoTrac), Biography Index (CT100.B6 and online via WilsonWeb), Biography Resource Center (online), Contemporary Authors (PN129.C565- and online via GaleNet), Marquis Who's Who publications (in print [various call numbers]). Other biographical sources can be identified by using the UNF Library catalog to search for an area of interest combined with the keyword biography – for example, <i>african americans and biography and dictionary</i> will provide such sources as African American Writers and African American Culture. To identify the author's publications, choose one of the library's databases in the subject area that you are researching and do an author search. You might also want to check citation indexes such as the Arts & Humanities Search (online via FirstSearch) and the Social Sciences Citation Index (online in the Web of Science) for references to the author's article(s) and for other articles by the author. JOURNALS: Cabell's Directory of Publishing Opportunities in Accounting, Economics and Finance (H91.C224), Cabell's Directory of Publishing Opportunities in Education (Z286.E3C32), Cabell's Directory of Publishing Opportunities in Management and Marketing (HD28.C13), Cabell's Directory of Publishing Opportunities in Nursing (RT24.C3), Magazines for Libraries (Z286.E3C32), Ulrich's International Periodicals Directory (Z6941.U5 and online via Ulrich's Web), and specialized periodical directories such as the Directory of Scholarly Journals in English Language and Literature and the Author's Guide to Social Work Journals. Use the Library catalog to locate other sources by doing a keyword subject search on the phrase "periodicals directories". And, of course, always check inside the front cover of the journal or on the reverse of the title page for additional information about the journal's scope and article acceptance policies.</p>		
<p>Author/Journal Affiliation: Is the author affiliated with a professional association or organization? Is the author a faculty member at a university or college? Is the author on the editorial board of the journal? Is the author a researcher employed by a research institute or professional think tank? Is the journal published by an academic institution, a professional association, or a commercial publisher that specializes in academic publishing?</p>	<p>Affiliation</p>	<p>Author Affiliation/Sponsor: If an author is listed for the Web site, is the author's affiliation with a company, school, organization, or other collective body of some sort made clear? If affiliation is given, is the body recognized for its contributions to the field represented in the Web site? If the Web site is a commercial Web site (a "dot com"), does it have an agenda other than to provide information? Is the site mainly designed to sell or promote products and does it provide information merely as a hook for its sales mission? Does the dot com utilize the services of noted authorities in the field in providing its information.</p>
<p>Verification Tools: AUTHORS: In some cases, the journal article or the Web site might provide information on author affiliation. If not, many of the same verification tools listed above for author verification are also valuable in determining author affiliations. Beyond author biographical sources, though, once a professional association, a company, or other corporate body has been identified in relationship to the author, check for further information on the body's mission and goals by using sources such as the Encyclopedia of Associations (HS17.E52 and online via the Gale Directory Library), the International Research Centers Directory (Q179.98.I58), and Research Centers Directory (AS25.D5). If no affiliation is given for a Web site, some determination of affiliation can be made by examining the site's URL (Domain name endings provide some indication: .com = commercial site, .org = an association or organization site, .gov = government site, .net = a network of some sort, .mil = a military site, .edu = an education site). Although these indicators may not be the best means for determining affiliation, they do provide at least a bit more information on what type of organization is providing the information. Note that Web sites outside the United States use two letter codes to indicate country of origin rather than the three letter codes commonly used in the U.S. For example, a Web site based in the United Kingdom might end with the two letter code .uk, while a Web site originating in New Zealand might end in .nz. If the Web address is very long, try cutting back on the address to the first single slash to discover the organization behind the Web site. For example, in the address http://www.unf.edu/~alderman/InternetBasics/, the organization where the site is hosted can be discovered by using just the first part of the address: http://www.unf.edu. JOURNALS: The same tools listed in the previous Authority section of this guide will be useful in determining journal affiliation. If the journal is published by an educational institution, by a commercial publisher, by a professional organization, etc., directories such as Cabell's and Ulrich's will provide the affiliation information. The Encyclopedia of Associations is also useful in identifying what publications are published by individual associations.</p>		

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Publication Date:

Determining currency for a journal article is simple. All journals include the date (either month/date/year, month/year, or year) somewhere in the publication. Many list the date at the head of the article. Others run the date of the issue either at the bottom or the top of the page. For electronic copies of journal articles, the information is usually provided along with the article's bibliographic information at the top of the article. If the article is reproduced in PDF or other image format, the date will appear exactly as it did in the print publication. If, for any reason, the copy of the article that you are working with does not have the date, a quick search of an article index will normally provide you with verification of the date as well as of the volume, issue number, and page numbers for the original print article. For example, a search of the ProQuest ABI/Inform database will allow you to trace information on articles published in nearly 1000 business journals since the early 1970s.

Currency

Document Date:

Is the document dated? If there is no date on the page that you are viewing, is the overall Web site dated anywhere? Are there any other contextual clues as to the recency of the information? Is there a reference list included with the information and, if so, what is the latest date of the references included in the documentation for the article?

Determining currency for a Web site can often be very tricky. It is especially important to try to locate this information, though, to help determine the accuracy of the information that you are retrieving. Undated articles that have no other contextual clues as to recency should probably be avoided as references.

Verification Tools:

JOURNALS: If you have retained a print copy of the journal article, it normally will have an indication of the date of the article somewhere in the article. If it does not for some reason, you can always return to one of the library's online databases to search for the article by title or by author or by some other keyword approach. The databases as a matter of course will provide all the publishing information available on the article, which almost always includes the date of publication.

WEB SITES: Other than the Web site itself, the only other date verification tools at your disposal will be other citing Web sites that provide reference to the article that you hope to use, print bibliographies of Web sites recommended for research on a particular topic, and the Web review services on the Internet (sites such as Magellan and Yahoo actually review the Web sites that they link from their directories). Check the library's catalog for any print guides to Web sites.

Article Characteristics:

Research articles are generally fairly easy to discern from more general, popular articles.

---- Is the article in a research or academic publication? The type of publication in which an article appears is one of the first dead give-aways that an article is a research article. Is the publication a journal or scholarly publication? If so, then it most likely publishes primarily research or scholarly articles. Generally speaking, if the publication has a slick, glossy format, then it probably is not a research journal.

---- Does the article include footnotes and/or a reference list? An article that incorporates research will have a reference list and may also have footnotes. If the article's information is not documented in a reference list, it may be an opinion piece, an editorial, a narrative, a work of fiction, or it may be an overview of a topic written for popular consumption. In any case, without references, it is likely not a research article.

---- Does the article include empirical data in support of a research study? Likely, if the article does report the results of a study, it will also include a literature review and, thus a reference list.

---- Does the language of the article reflect a popular focus or does it incorporate vocabulary and concepts that are more suitable for a specialized, academic audience?

Purpose/ Audience

Web Site Characteristics:

Web sites can be particularly difficult to pin down, but some of the same characteristics listed for research articles can be observed when you are evaluating a Web site.

---- Does the site include footnotes and references that support the information provided?

---- Does the site include tables and charts that present empirical data that was used in support of a study?

---- Does the language used in the site reflect attention to a general, popular audience or does it seem more appropriate for a specialized or academic audience?

The fly in the ointment is that many commercial sites, the so-called dot coms, provide much good, solid information that can be used in research as an adjunct to their consumer-oriented Web sites. In other words, while they are in the business of offering products or selling services they may also provide much valuable information. So you shouldn't dismiss a site's value just because it is a dot com. Look for clear identification of responsibility for the materials provided before dismissing the information out of hand. For example, one of the best sites on the Web for discovering valid medical information is Medscape, which just happens to have a dot com address.

Verification Tools:

JOURNALS: The same tools that are used to evaluate journal qualities can be used to make assumptions about the articles included in the journals and their intended audience and purpose. A professional journal published for a specific group of professionals is likely to have articles that are written for that specific audience and are not intended for the general public. As such, they will likely be research articles. So, here, we can use the journal's own information on the scope of its coverage as well as the guides to journals that were mentioned in the section on Authority above.

WEB SITES: Here you are on your own, unless the Web site specifically addresses to whom the information is targeted. You should try to discover if the site is maintained by an association or by an educational institution or by whatever group as you consider the site's purpose and intended audience. Reviews from one of the Web reviewing projects mentioned earlier will also be useful.

Other Evaluation Guides Available on the Web:

---- Infopeople. Evaluating Internet Resources: a Checklist. Available: <http://www.infopeople.org/resources/select.html>

---- UC Berkeley Library. Critical Evaluation of Resources. Available: <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/instruct/guides/evaluation.html>

---- Duke University Libraries. Evaluating Resources. Available: <http://library.duke.edu/services/instruction/libraryguide/evaluating.html>

---- World-Wide Web Virtual Library. Evaluation of Information Sources. Available: http://www.vuw.ac.nz/staff/alastair_smith/evaln/evaln.htm