

HUNTER COLLEGE READING/WRITING CENTER  
**The Documented Essay/Research Paper**  
**Writing from Sources: Evaluating Internet Sources**

Information on the internet runs the gamut from web-based versions of print publications, to scholarly sites, to professional, commercial, or personal web pages. Thus not all information found on the web is necessarily authoritative or valid. The following is a set of steps for evaluating information on the web and deciding whether or not to use it as part of your research.

The type of research you are doing will affect your decisions. For a more informal paper, you may choose to use information from less authoritative sites, the popular press, and so on. But for a scholarly paper, it's important to find sources which meet the standards of the academy or the academic discipline you are writing in.

### **1. Identifying Information**

Among the most basic bibliographic information a researcher provides is the author and title of the source of information. Yet depending on how you accessed a source on the internet, this information may not seem to be available, particularly if you used a search engine.

If the author is not listed on the page you access, you can use the URL to return to the home page from which the information is linked. There you will find the author or the name of the sponsoring institution, which can be listed as an organizational author.

If you are unable to determine an author or sponsoring institution, you should consider the value of including a source of unknown authorship and validity.

### **2. Internal Evidence**

A spurious document will often betray its own invalidity. Spelling, grammatical, and punctuation errors or biased language may be evidence of a less than accurate or objective source. The date of the document can also be a factor. Even if claims were valid when written, the situation may have changed. If there is no clear date of publication, that alone may raise questions as to the validity of the source.

### **3. Authority**

In evaluating sources, you want to know something about the persons or organizations responsible for them. What are the author's or organization's credentials and how do they relate to the type of information in the source? Is the person or organization known and do they have a reputation for reliability? What organization is the author affiliated with? For example, do they work for a university or a major publisher?

Finding out about an author or organization may be as simple as locating the home page from which your source is linked. If the site does not provide this kind of information or does not provide much, you might try doing a web search of the author or organization to obtain additional information.

### **4. Objectivity**

If there is a sponsoring institution, consider whether this institution might have a bias that would affect the information in the source. Also be aware that if the organization responsible for the source is political or is acting as an advocate for a cause, it might have an agenda it is putting forth. People and organizations that have interests other than simply presenting the truth are less credible than those without such other interests. So sites from potentially biased sources might be less objective and less accurate than apparently neutral sources. Be aware, however, that some such sites are scrupulously attentive to the facts despite their interest. Use your judgment.

### **5. Corroboration**

If some of the information can be compared with information from other sources that are known to be reliable, consider whether the information in the source is consistent with the information in the reliable source. Be aware that discord is not necessarily proof of invalidity; there may be good reason why sources disagree with each other. Use the other criteria given above to help you decide if a source has the credibility and authority to offer an opposing viewpoint.

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If it sounds as if following these guidelines might require a lot of work, that is the case. You can save some time by using an academic database, such as Academic Search Premiere, to obtain peer reviewed sources of information. But keep in mind, too, that there's nothing wrong with doing a little extra work to assure the quality of your sources. The information and arguments you present in a research paper are only as good as the source materials you use. Working on obtaining quality information is well worth the effort.

*Material for this handout was adapted from Doyle, Tony and John L. Hammond. "Net cred: evaluating the internet as a research source." Reference Services Review, 34.1 (2006).*

