HOW TO EVALUATE WEB SITES
An Important Skill in Information Literacy

MICHAEL P. HUFF
Michael P. Huff
Information Resource Officer
U.S. Department of State
My Background

- Librarian
- Teacher
- Parent
What is information literacy?

- Information literacy is a set of abilities requiring individuals to "recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information." Knowing what to do with information, being able to tell good information from bad.
What is information literacy?

• Know when you need information.
• Know how to find information.
• Know how to tell if information is good or bad.
• Know how to use information to solve your problem or answer your question.
How to **Evaluate** Web Sites

• Is that web site good enough to cite?
This web site looks good. But how can I tell for sure?
Are you confused by the World Wide Web?

- There are billions of websites.
- Many of them are not worth your time and don’t belong in your research.
- Sometimes it’s difficult to tell the treasure from the rubbish.
- Sometimes bad web sites don’t want you to see the difference.
Anyone can publish anything on the web.

• It is your job, as a student researcher, to look for quality.

“On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.”
How can I tell if a website is good?

How can we be sure *our* teacher will think it’s good enough to cite?
CARRDSS

• CREDIBILITY
• ACCURACY
• RELIABILITY
• RELEVANCE
• DATE
• SOURCES BEHIND THE TEXT
• SCOPE AND PURPOSE
CREDIBILITY

• Who is the author?
• What are the author's credentials?
• Is the author qualified to write on this topic?
What if I cannot find any information about a web site's author?
Clues to credibility

• Words and phrases to look for on a web site:
  – About
  – FAQs
  – For More Information
  – Company Information
  – Profiles
  – Our Staff
What do others think?

- Do a **link check**
  - In **Google**
  - link:siteaddress
  
  - (link:istanbul.usconsulate.gov)

Your results will show which other sites have chosen to link to this page. If respectable institutions have linked to a site, that provides a clue about the site’s credibility.
Shorten the URL

• Delete characters in the address line up to the next slash mark to see if the home page offers more information about who is responsible for publishing a web site.

  - http://www.nba.com
Searching further

• If you have an author’s name but no further information about credentials and credibility,
  – Search the name in quotation marks in a search engine or online database;
  – Search the name in biographical sources on- and offline;
  – Or ask your teacher or librarian for help.
ACCURACY

• Can facts, statistics, or other information be verified through other sources?
• Based on your knowledge, does the information seem accurate? Is the information inconsistent with information you learned from other sources?
• Is the information second hand?
• Do there appear to be errors on the page (spelling, grammar, facts)?
RELIABILITY

• Does the source present a particular view or bias?
• Is the page affiliated with an organization that has a particular political or social agenda?
• Is the page selling a product?
• Can you find other material, with an opposite point of view, that is also credible?
• Was the information found in a paid placement or sponsored result from the search engine?
• Information is seldom neutral. Sometimes a bias is useful for persuasive essays or debates. Understanding bias is important.
Climate change

Shell shares the widespread concern that the emission of greenhouse gases from human activities is leading to changes in the global climate. Find out about our approach and learn how we are taking steps to manage our own emissions and help customers reduce theirs.

In The Shell Sustainability Report
Read the section on climate change from The Shell Sustainability Report 2005.

What is climate change?
What it is, tackling climate change and the reality of the issue.

Our approach to climate change
A clear position on the issue.

Managing our emissions
Our target for 2010 and how we plan to meet it.

Helping customers reduce emissions
Cleaner power generation, more sustainable transport and alternative energies.

Energy and carbon footprint
Energy and emissions from the production, refining and final use of energy products we produce.

Participating in the debates
Listening, learning and contributing.

Sequestration of carbon dioxide
Our approach.
Stop climate change

Greenpeace is asking you to take part in an energy revolution. To go from a world powered by nuclear and fossil fuels to one running on renewable energy. Human caused climate change is a reality. Fortunately, there are proven energy solutions we can put to use today to provide sustainable development and energy for all. Will this energy transformation occur rapidly enough to avert the worst effects of a warming world? You will help decide the answer to that question.

If you still need convincing to join the energy revolution, check out what climate change will mean for you:

2°C makes a big difference to your life.

Launch multimedia introduction

Take part in the energy revolution by:

Choosing to take action

Studying the solutions

Learning about the science of climate change
Open Letter on the President’s Position on Climate Change

Following last Friday’s release of a new report by the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a number of media reports perpetuated inaccuracies that the President’s concern about climate change is new. In fact, climate change has been a top priority since the President’s first year in office.

Beginning in June 2001, President Bush has consistently acknowledged climate change is occurring and humans are contributing to the problem. Consider the following statements by the President:

- “First, we know the surface temperature of the earth is warming...There is a natural greenhouse effect that contributes to warming...And the National Academy of Sciences indicates that the increase is due in large part to human activity.” — June 11, 2001
- “My Administration is committed to cutting our Nation’s greenhouse gas intensity...by 18 percent over the next 10 years. This will set America on a path to slow the growth of our greenhouse gas emissions and, as science justifies, stop and then reverse the growth of emissions.” — February 14, 2002
- “America is on the verge of technological breakthroughs that will enable us to live our lives less dependent on oil...they will help us to confront the serious challenge of global climate change.” — January 23, 2007

President Bush has committed the United States to meeting tough, ambitious targets that reduce our emissions of greenhouse gases and ensure that the life we have known is the life our children will enjoy. It is time for all of us to take responsibility for our climate, and for the President’s efforts to ensure a clean, healthy future to be fully recognized.
RELEVANCE

• Does this information directly support your thesis or help to answer your question?

• Can you eliminate or ignore it because it simply doesn’t help you?
DATE

• When was this information created?
• When was it revised?
• Are these dates meaningful in terms of your information needs?
• Has the author of the page stopped maintaining it?
• (Be suspicious of undated material.)
SOURCES

• Did the author bother to document his or her sources? Use reliable, credible sources?
• Were those references popular, scholarly, reputable?
• Are those sources real? Have you or your librarian heard of or been able to verify them?
• Is the material reproduced (accurately) from another publication? Does it cite that publication?
• What kind of links did the author choose?
• Are the hyperlinks reliable, valuable?
• Do the links work?
SCOPE

• Is it a scholarly or popular treatment?
• Is it material I can read and understand?
  – Is it too simple? Is it too challenging?
• Who is the intended audience?
• Why was this page created?
  – To inform or explain?
  – To persuade?
  – To sell?
What can you learn from a URL?

• You can use the end, or suffix of a domain name to help you judge the validity of the information and the potential bias of a website.

• This strategy is only a guideline. People can easily purchase domains that do not reflect their actual purpose.
What is the country of the web site?

- .tr - Turkey
- .uk - United Kingdom
- .us - United States (rarely used)
- .gr - Greece
- .it - Italy
- .es - Spain
URLs as clues to content

- **.com** = commercial sites (vary in their credibility)
- **.gov** = U.S. government site
- **.org** = organization, often non-profit. Some have strong bias and agendas
- **.edu** = school or university site (is it K-12? By a student? By a scholar?)
- **.mil** = U.S. military site
- **.biz** = a business
What do their URLs reveal about these sites?

- http://personal.statecollege.edu/~ejv114/
- http://www.fi.edu/wright/index.html
- http://www.house.gov/house/Legproc.html
- http://aolmembers.com/joyciev328/civalwarsong
Remember, the *free* Web is not your only choice.

- Did you use print sources?
- Did you search subscription databases?
- Did you check with your teacher-librarian for advice?
Evaluating Blogs

- Who is the blogger?
- What sorts of materials is the blogger reading or citing?
- Is this content covered in any depth, with any authority? How sophisticated is the language, the spelling?
- Is there a substantial archive? How current are the posts?
- Is the site upfront about its bias? Does it recognize and discuss other points of view?
Why should we care about all of this?
School research trains you to work and prosper in real life.
You will be using information to make important decisions.

– Which university should I attend?
– Which car should I buy?
– Which doctor should I choose?
– For whom should I vote?

• You want to be able to ensure the information you choose is reliable, credible, current, balanced, relevant, and accurate.
Just as you evaluate your sources . . .

- Your teacher will evaluate your work based on the quality of the sources you select.
- Evaluate carefully. Don’t settle for just *good enough*.
- Quality always counts. It only takes a little extra effort to be first-class.
Evaluation is important!

- Information literacy is the key to evaluation.
Thank you for your attention.

And good luck with your studies.

Any questions?