



Evaluating Web Content

This guide offers tips for evaluating the quality of content on the Web. In recent years, the Web has become a rich environment of Web pages, blogs, wikis, social networking sites, free research services, media types and more. It can be a challenge to figure out which content to trust. This guide will help you to identify the type of site you are visiting and to evaluate its content.

A few tips to get you started

Here are a few general tips for evaluating content on the Web. Check that ...

- the author has expertise on the topic. See the next section below for details.
- the source of the content is stated, whether original or borrowed, quoted, or imported from elsewhere. Material imported from another source via RSS feed can be difficult to identify, as this material can blend in with other content on the page without being appropriately labeled.
- the content can be independently verified from other sources. This is especially important if you cannot check on the expertise of the author, or if the author is not identified.
- the level and depth of the information meets your needs.
- an attractive, professional-looking presentation doesn't fool you into accepting all the material at face value. Shoddy presentations are easier to recognize and are a warning to carefully scrutinize the material.
- the site is currently being maintained. Check for posting or editing dates.
- up-to-date information is provided for topics that require it.
- links are relevant and appropriate, and are in working order.
- the site includes contact information.
- the domain location in the site address (URL) is relevant to the focus of the material, e.g., .edu for educational or research materials, .org for profit or non-profit organizations. Note that the domain is not necessarily a primary indicator of site content. For example, some authors post their content on blog or wiki platforms hosted by companies with .com addresses.

Determining the expertise of the author

On today's Web, it can be a challenge to judge content based on the identity of the author. Sometimes the author is not stated, or a nickname is used. When an author's name is shown, here are a few tips on checking out this individual's expertise.

- Search a library database or Google Scholar to identify other writings by the author.
- Search for your author in Google Scholar to see if others have cited works by your author in their own writings.
- "Google" the author to identify other writings by or about the author. Sometimes an author's participation in a conference or other professional activity can be identified in the search results.
- If available, consult an "About" page on the Web site on which the content appears to read the author's self-description. Attempt to verify some of the facts.
- If the author is affiliated with an academic institution, business, or organization, check the directory on the associated Web site to confirm the author's status.

Web Sites

Web sites are a unified collection of pages that run the gamut from educating to informing to selling to persuading, and may combine purposes. The content generally originates from the Web site owner, be it an individual, organization, company, or government entity; however, RSS feeds may introduce imported content.

Examples: American Memory, ASPCA, Historical Novel Society

To evaluate the content on a Web site, look for these clues:

- The author/producer is identifiable.
- The author/producer has expertise on the subject. Look for an "About" or similar page.
- The type of domain (.edu, .org, .gov, etc.), which may provide some clues about the focus of the material. However, keep in mind that scholars and other content providers may choose to maintain their materials on other domains, for example .com.
- The material is up to date, and the site appears to be maintained. Check for update dates on the site.
- For informational or educational sites, sources are given for the information, or links are provided to related sources of information. You may need to verify the information through other sources.

Free Research Sites

These are Web sites that provide research materials or links to these materials. Some of these services, such as Amazon, also provide reader reviews. Others, such as Google Scholar, feature links to other works that cite its scholarly content. They are distinguished by their ability to provide or link to in-depth information in one or more areas. While the sites themselves are free, they may lead to information that needs to be paid for or subscribed to.

Examples: LibraryThing, Amazon, Google Scholar

To evaluate a free research site, consider the following:

- The content is in-depth and rich enough to meet your needs.
- The provider and purpose of the site, and whether these might have an effect on the information provided.
- The type of material that appears on the site, e.g., a mixture of scholarly and popular materials, or scholarly materials only.
- Whether the site provides the content, or points to other sources, which would then need to be evaluated in turn.
- The ease of obtaining the full text of the material, if it is not available within the site itself (for example, the resources returned in a Google Scholar search).
- Most of the reviews on the site, if present, are informative and well-written.
- The identity and expertise of the author or authors of the specific content you are interested in. A multitude of people might contribute information/opinions/reviews, and it might not be possible to get information on them or their expertise.

Document Repositories

Document repositories store copies of scholarly and research materials that are available for public use. They are usually maintained by academic institutions, libraries, publishers, or organizations. Some of these repositories post papers before or after their publication in scholarly journals, and different versions of papers may appear. Repositories may contain text, data, presentations, and multimedia materials.

Examples: arXiv.org, California Digital Library, RePEc: Research Papers in Economics

To evaluate the content in a document repository, look for these clues:

- The repository is sponsored by a reputable academic institution, library, publisher, or organization.
- The repository is searchable in OAISTER , a reputable union catalog of academic-oriented digital resources.
- The author has expertise on the topic. This will apply to more recent, as opposed to historical, documents.
- If the document in question is an article, it has been published in a reputable journal. The identity of the “official” publication in a journal can help determine the copy of record for the publication.
- The material you are interested in cites sources that you can use to verify the information.

Blogs and Wikis

How to tell them apart

Before addressing how to evaluate content on blogs and wikis, let’s consider how to tell them apart. At times, it can be difficult to determine if you are viewing a blog or a wiki.

To determine which is which, consider the following:

- Blog content is organized around “news” postings about which readers can comment. Wiki content is organized around topic-based Web pages that are usually edited by groups.
- A blog usually features date-based postings on its main page, organized in reverse chronological order. A wiki looks like a typical Web site, and usually includes a link for logging in to the site for editors who wish to or are authorized to contribute.
- A blog usually allows readers to comment on its individual postings. Wikis offer comments or “talk” pages for discussion of the content on individual wiki pages.
- Blogs often focus on personal insight, anecdote, or opinion. Wiki content is usually less personal.
- A blog is typically maintained by a single individual, while wikis tend to have numerous contributors. However, this is not a hard-and-fast rule.
- Blog postings are written by the administrator(s) of the blog, and not by the general public. Wikis can be edited by anyone, or by the invitation/authorization of the wiki administrator(s).
- Visible “edit” links are often available to anyone visiting the wiki. Blogs do not allow for public editing.

- The history of wiki page edits can be viewed by visitors. Blogs do not have this feature.
- It is generally easier to identify the name of the individual maintaining a blog. On wikis, the identity of authors/editors may be more difficult to determine as nicknames may be used.

Blogs

A blog is a Web-based journal entry platform that can accept reader comments. Entries are usually presented in reverse chronological order.

Examples: AltSearchEngines, Instapundit.com, TechCrunch

To evaluate the content on a blog, look for these clues:

- Most blog postings focus on a discussion of issues rather than day-to-day personal or recreational activities.
- Blog postings are signed by an identifiable author.
- The author has expertise on the topic of the blog.
- Comments on blog postings emphasize substantive discussion of the issues.
- Blog postings are cited on other blogs. A blog search engine such as Technorati can help to determine this, and general search engines are also useful.
- Links to the blog or its individual postings are saved on social bookmarking sites such as Delicious.
- New blog postings appear fairly regularly – though archived blogs can contain useful material.

Wikis

A wiki is a publishing platform on which many people can contribute new content and revise existing content. The content benefits from the collective knowledge base and the dynamic nature of the contributions.

Examples: Wikipedia, wikiHow, Wikimedia Commons

To evaluate the content on a wiki, look for these clues:

- The sponsorship of the wiki. This may be explained on an “About” or similar page.
- The wiki, whether academic or popular, suits your needs.
- The identity of those who are able to edit or add content. If it is a select group, try to determine if they have expertise in the wiki’s topic.

- Changes to the page appear reasonable.
- The material you are interested in cites sources that you can use to double-check the information.
- There are guidelines for contributors to follow.
- There is monitoring of content by those responsible for the wiki, and you can determine who these authors are (often you can't).
- The currency of the edits. Some wiki platforms offer a "History" or similar tab that allows you to view a sequential list of changes.

Social networking sites

Social networking sites are online communities in which members can interact in a number of ways. Full-featured communities offer the ability to share a personal profile, initiate contacts with "friends," form groups of members with similar interests, contact group members directly, engage in discussions, share media or photos, and discover other common connections through ones' contacts. Some social networking sites allow members to create interactive software that functions within the community. Others allow institutions or companies to maintain profiles or pages. The sites may be focused on a specialized interest or may be more general in nature. While social networking sites are often used for recreation, they can also serve as a means of communicating about academic or professional interests.

Examples: Facebook, MySpace, Ning, TripAdvisor, Twitter

To evaluate the content on a social networking site, look for these clues:

- The identity of the source of shared information can be verified. This can be done by examining the profile page if made public, verifying the named source of the information, and so on.
- Information on the profile page of the individual, institution, company, or library can be verified.
- The individual, institution, etc. contributing information has expertise on the topic.
- Information picked up in a social network receives favorable comments, can be externally verified, or meets your needs.
- The institutions or companies offering community-based applications can be identified. You can also check for reviews of the application or see if any of your "friends" are using it.

Social bookmarks

Social bookmarks are links saved on Web sites that allow users to annotate, tag, and share them with other users.

Examples: Delicious, CiteULike, Connotea

To evaluate the content on a social bookmarking site, look for these clues:

- The purpose of the bookmarking site. For example, CiteULike and Connotea focus on scholarly papers while Delicious is more broadly based.
- Bookmarks of interest to you have also been bookmarked by others.
- The quality of the bookmarked item. Determining this will be the same as determining the quality of any Web resource.
- The individual who bookmarked the site has expertise on the topic. This often cannot be determined, as users tend to employ nicknames as their identities.

Multimedia

Multimedia encompasses non-textual presentations such as audio, video, and Flash formats. You might encounter multimedia files anywhere on the Web – a Web site, blog, wiki, repository, or a site devoted to media such as YouTube.

Terminology: A variety of terminology is used to describe multimedia on the Web. These terms are in flux, and can depend on the type of media, its delivery, and whether the broadcast is live or recorded. For example, pre-recorded audio or video presentations can be distributed through an RSS feed. In this case, they are referred to as podcasts. (Some people refer to audio on an RSS feed as a podcast, and video on an RSS feed as a video podcast.) A live video presentation is usually known as a webcast. A variation on this is a webinar, a seminar broadcast on the Web.

To evaluate the content in a multimedia presentation, look for these clues:

- The presentation is sponsored by a reputable institution, organization, or identified individual(s) whose expertise can be verified.
- If individuals appear or speak in a presentation, they are identified and their expertise can be checked.
- The presentation or its accompanying information includes contact information.
- Comments that may accompany the presentation evaluate its quality (even if you don't agree with what others have to say).
- If previously recorded, the presentation can be identified by date so that you can determine the currency of the information provided.