

## EVALUATING & USING INTERNET RESOURCES

The Internet is a vital source for research – it is convenient, easy to use and fairly easily accessible. However, unlike publishing houses there is no regulatory body that rates the quality of the information. It is therefore your responsibility to evaluate the quality and credibility of the information you find online. For the most part, evaluating online sources is not much different from evaluating primary sources as a historian – the tools of “external” and “internal” criticism should get you a long way. Here are some guidelines that can help you determine whether or not you want to use a particular site in class.

### 1) **Presentation:**

The presentation of a site will affect the way your students will access and receive the information. Consider the following questions:

*General* →

- How long does it take for the site to download?
- Does the site come with a lot of advertising (often in “pop-up windows”)?
- Do you find the site attractive?
- Are the graphics distracting from rather than supporting/conveying the message?
- If the site provides external links – are these actually relevant?
- Does the site respect copyright laws? (e.g. is bibliographical information provided when necessary?)

*Is the information easily accessible for your students?* →

- Are the sections of the site properly labeled?
- Is there a site map?
- Does the site cater to different learning styles? (e.g. purely text-based information vs. balance between images and text)
- Will the information be understandable to your students?

### 2) **Authorship and publishing body:**

Some of the first things you should try to establish have to do with authorship and readership. Basically, you are subjecting the website to “external criticism” and are trying to evaluate whether this particular site is the best available online source on the topic you are interested in. Consider the following:

*General clues on authorship* → a website's URL is the most reliable indicator of its publishing body; typically when the URL ends on:

- .edu → the site is that of an educational institution (often a university, college, ...);
- .gov or .fed → the site is that of a government agency;
- .org → the site is that of a non-profit organization or public interest group;
- .com → the site is that of a corporation and web service provider;
- if the site has a personal author – consider doing a “google” on this person to see if you can find out more about him/her;

*With what aim is the site created and for what type of audience is it meant?* →

- Is the author's aim to inform, persuade, report, sell, ...?
- Is the site appropriate for readers of my students' age?

*Publication date* →

- Can you check when the site was last updated?

- Is a “date of publication” provided? (depending on what kind of information you’re looking for, currency is not always necessary – nevertheless, it can make a difference whether a website is well-maintained and regularly updated or whether it looks as if it has been “abandoned” a while ago)

### **3) Judging the information:**

Once a site has passed your “external criticism”, you should read through the information it provides and ask yourself a number of questions. In other words, you’re turning to “internal criticism”. Consider the following:

*Usefulness* →

- Does the site answer my question / the question my students are trying to answer?

*Credibility* →

- What might the biases of the author be? (e.g., based on the role/mission of the institution or organization that maintains the site; the country/region of origin of the personal author, institution or organization; the aim(s) of the site)
- Is the author “able” to report truthfully? (e.g., if you are looking online for *primary sources* – such as webdiaries, government documents, ... – then “nearness” in time and place to the events you want to research tends to be important: the reliability of a primary source tends to vary in proportion to the witness’s remoteness from the event in time and space)
- Can you corroborate the information provided in the site with two or more other *independent* sources?

### **4) Citing online resources:**

To guide students in their research and to teach them how to retrieve information from several (online) sources without copying it, you can visit:

- the Hamilton Writing Center →  
<http://www.hamilton.edu/academics/resource/wc/usingresources.html>



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