

HOW TO EVALUATE INTERNET INFORMATION

(from <http://sol.slcc.edu/lr/navigator/discovery/eval.html>)

The Internet is a huge and very dynamic resource. There are so many different types of information available that identifying quality resources can sometimes be difficult. Some Internet resources are poorly indexed, or not indexed at all. A search in Alta Vista or another Internet index may provide a list of hundreds or thousands of items. Web page titles are often non-descriptive which makes them more confusing. Being able to quickly and critically evaluate a long list of links or titles is a very useful skill. Use the criteria listed below, and your search experience, to enhance this skill and improve your ability to evaluate Internet information.

Criteria for evaluating Internet information

Usefulness

- How useful is the information for your particular need?
- If you can't identify its usefulness immediately, it should be considered a low priority to save, print or read online.

Quality

Evaluate the content

What kind of information is it?

- Is it facts or opinions?
- Is there any documentation?
 - bibliography
 - footnotes
 - credits
 - quotations

Does the information support or refute your position? Are any major findings presented? How does the information compare to other related sources?

Evaluate the format

Can you clearly identify what type of information it is?

- Is it a Web Home page?
- Is it a Gopher?
- Is it a newsgroup posting?
- Is it a file or downloadable software?
- Is it a government report?
- Is it an advertisement?

Is the information in an appropriate or useful format for your needs?

- slides

- graphics, or other media
- statistical tables
- programs or software

Does it have the features you need?

- graphs
- charts
- illustrations
- glossaries
- maps

How complete is the information?

Balance, Objectivity, Bias, Accuracy

- What is the intended purpose of the information?
- Why is the information being presented or made available?
- What is the perspective of the publication(s)?
- Is the information presented accurately and objectively? How can you tell? What clues are present to help you judge?

Authoritativeness, Scholarship

- Who wrote, created or published the information?
- How easy is it to clearly identify the authority of the authors?
- Is the author's perspective culturally diverse, or narrowly focused?
- How well has the author documented the sources of the information presented?

Timeliness, Currency

- When was the information produced?
- Is the information too old or too new for the needs of your research?

Originality

- Is it primary information or secondary information?
- Is the originality of the information important for your research?

Accessibility, Availability

- How accessible is the information?
- How easy is it to find and use?
- How much time does it take to access the resource?
- How stable is the information resource or its provider? Will it be available again if you need it at a later date?
- Be aware that some Internet information can be very transitory or short lived.

Cost

- Is the information free, or is there a fee for the information?
- Sometimes it can be beneficial to pay for information if
 - it saves you time
 - you will make or save money by having the information
 - it is the only known source of the information

Also remember, information isn't free if it takes too much of your time to find, print, read or manage.

With so much Internet information available, it is easy to suffer from information anxiety. Use the evaluation criteria listed above to help you decide what information you really want to look for, save and use for your research.