



# Science Online

## Evaluating Online Sources

The Internet has become an indispensable tool for students, educators, and researchers. However, because of the ease with which information can be published online, it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish sources that are reliable from those that are untrustworthy. Use the following criteria when you are judging an online source:

### Accuracy

Is the material correct? Are there any spelling or grammatical mistakes? Has the information been edited and fact-checked? Are there any factual errors? There may be a descriptive page about the resource that explains how it obtains and evaluates the content it provides. Remember to check a factual statement you find on the Internet against at least two other sources to make sure it is correct.

### Authorship and Publication

Does the document identify its author? Is the person or company publishing the information reliable and trustworthy? To assess whether a source is authoritative, look for an author's name or biography on the Web site. What are this person's credentials? Can this person claim authority in that field? If the information is being published by a company, is it a reputable company? Does it give contact information such as an email address for readers' questions or comments?

Examining the URL of a Web site can also indicate the source of its information. Information from a **.gov** address is from a U.S. government site. Information from a **.edu** address is from an educational institution. However, the symbol ~ in a URL indicates that it is a personal address. Educational institutions often host Web sites for professors or students without exerting any control over the information published on them.

### Currency

Is the information up to date? Be careful about trusting information you find on an old-looking Web site. Look for a "Last updated" statement, especially if your research is on a subject relating to the present day.

Also, check the Web site for broken links. A lot of broken links can indicate that the site has not been maintained or updated for some time.

### Objectivity

What is the Web site's purpose? Is it solely to provide information, or is it to sell a product or express an opinion? Is it biased? Are facts included? If so, is the purpose to present complete, objective information, or to skew opinion by giving only a certain portion of the relevant information?

Different Web sites have very different goals. For example, you can trust information you read about migratory birds on the Web site of the Smithsonian Institute. But if a Web site claims "According to Recent Reports, Canada Geese Have Been Seen In Antarctica," can you trust that assertion? Can you verify the information the Web site presents? Does the document identify its author, and can this person claim authority in the field?

## Layout

Is it easy to find information on the Web site? Does the Web site have a lot of pop-up ads and distracting advertisements? Such ads can detract from a site's own content.



## Citation Information

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