



University of KwaZulu-Natal Library, Pietermaritzburg

EVALUATING INTERNET RESOURCES

Library guide

Evaluating resources on the Internet

Why do I need to do this?

- Anyone can publish anything on the Internet
- Some sites are not what they claim to be
- Information can be biased
- Sites might be out of date or incomplete
- Some sites assume you have special software

How do I assess the quality of resources?

Ask four basic questions about the site:

- 1) who?
- 2) where?
- 3) what?
- 4) when?

1) Who has written the documents or provided the data?

- who is represented - an organisation or an individual personal viewpoint?
- is the source authoritative and reliable?
- are there references to other documents/sites by the same author?
- what is the motivation for providing the information? What audience is aimed at?

Check out the following:

- read about the site, its background information, who it links to
- even if the site comes from an organisation, check if it is an official organisation site or that of an individual
- find out about the organisation/person from other sources
- is there an e-mail address where you can contact the source?
- who sponsored the site, is it trying to sell a product, promote a point of view?
- has the site been reviewed elsewhere, e.g. by a subject gateway (see below)?

2) Where is the site located?

- where is the site based? e.g. at a university, company, organization?
- in what country and therefore how relevant to your requirements?
- what is the relationship between the server owner and the author of a page?
- will the source be there tomorrow? Addresses change. Smaller sites come and go.

Check out the following:

- Analyse the address known as the URL (Uniform Resource Locator)
The domain tells you where the site is based and/or whom it is hosted by.
e.g. <http://www.library.ukzn.ac.za> - a library site based at ukzn (University of KwaZuluNatal)

Domain types are also informative, e.g:

- .ac or .edu for academic institutions
- .edu for American academic institutions
- .gov for government bodies
- .co or .com for commercial organisations
- .org for non-profit organisations
- .name for personal homepage, may have no official sanction

Almost every country has its own suffix, e.g:

- .za is South Africa
- .de is Germany
- .au is Australia
- .ca is Canada
- note that the USA tends not to use a country suffix

3) What are the contents and characteristics of the resources?

- what kind of resource is it? e.g. government, academic, commercial, etc.
- what is the coverage and scope? Is the academic level of the information appropriate? Is the information accurate?
- is a document the original or is it an abridged version, a review or a commentary?
- what assumptions lie beneath a table of statistics? How have the results been manipulated?
- is the resource a fake or a hoax?
- what is the copyright situation of the material? Are the documents posted up legally?
- is it easy to navigate the site?

Check out the following:

- the description of the site and the guide to its contents
- how balanced and complete is the information?
- the academic level and the target audience
- point of view or evidence of bias
- for a statistical table or dataset, check any accompanying documentation carefully
- is access free?
- is there a need to register in order to access the databases?
- what types of sources and formats are provided?
- are links relevant and appropriate?
- is special software required? e.g. can you view and download it?

Here are some file suffixes that tell you what type of file it is:

- .htm or .html are "Hypertext Mark-up Language" documents which can be read by your Internet browser
- .jpeg and .gif are graphics files

- .pdf are “Portable Document Format” files that require that the free plug-in Adobe Acrobat is loaded in order to read them
- .doc is a Microsoft Word document requiring a word processing package
- .ppt is a Microsoft Power Point presentation
- .wav is a sound file which requires a media player
- .mpeg is a video file which requires a special media player
- .exe is an executable file which runs a computer

4) When was the site updated and how current is the information?

- how old or how current is the information?
- how far back does the information go?
- how often is the site updated?
- do the hyperlinks work?

Also check out:

- dates on documents and on references cited
- dates of sources should always be cited
- the “last updated” date on the web pages
- links to other sites can go out of date very quickly - are the links still there?
- webmaster details and how to contact them

Summary:

Take the time to find out about the websites you use. When critically evaluating a website you learn its strengths and limitations and this knowledge helps you use these information resources intelligently. Don't take everything you read at face value! You cannot afford to use poor quality, out of date or misleading information in your own work.

Subject Gateways

Access reliable sites in specific subject areas

Subject gateways are specifically designed to help the academic community locate high quality Internet resources.

Key features:

- include sites selected and arranged by subject experts
- target a particular audience - usually the teaching, learning and research communities
- allow you to search or browse through subject listings
- provide expert descriptions of Internet resources
- contain a relatively small number of sites

Are most useful for:

- academic Internet resources in a particular area
- websites of high quality
- sites that support teaching and learning

Selected subject gateways

BUBL Information Service

<http://bubl.ac.uk/>

British site providing access to selected Internet resources covering all academic subject areas.

Intute

<http://www.intute.ac.uk/>

Free online service providing access to the very best Web resources for education and research. Created by a network of UK universities and partners. Subject specialists select and evaluate the websites in our database and write high quality descriptions of the resources.

Pinakes: a subject launchpad

<http://www.hw.ac.uk.libWWW/irn/pinakes.html>

Run by Dave Bond and Roddy MacLoed of the Heriot-Watt University Library, Scotland.

Yenza!

<http://www.nfr.ac.za/yenza/>

A South African site that includes some subject links for the humanities and social sciences.