Evaluate Websites and Other Online Sources

In this video, you will learn how to:
- evaluate websites based on the PROVEN criteria where PROVEN stands for: purpose, relevance, objectivity, verifiability, expertise, and newness.

If you are searching the web, rather than UNB Libraries' databases, how do you know whether your search has turned up sources that are credible, objective, and trustworthy? How do you know whether you can use a website as an academic source?

In a companion video to this one, called Evaluate Your Sources, we reviewed several key elements that signal academic authority in a publication, such as author's qualifications, publisher, references, peer review, and date of publication. However, these criteria work best when applied to traditional, academic sources. You need a different set of evaluation criteria, when searching for popular information on the web, such as news stories, government publications, and business or health information.

In this video, you will learn how to use the **PROVEN** evaluation process to ensure that you select online sources that are authoritative. **PROVEN** stands for: **purpose, relevance, objectivity, verifiability, expertise,** and **newness.**

Purpose

Who is the creator of the content and what is the purpose of the website? The purpose could include education, persuasion, entertainment, or the sale of products and services.

Tip
Find the "About" section for a description of the organization, its mission statement, and contributors, such as this example in Bloomberg.com. This will give you a better sense of the website's purpose and its intended audience.

Relevance

How does the information you find in an online source fulfill your research needs? How does the source compare to your other sources? Is the material in the source basic or advanced, general or specific?

Tip
Review the purpose of your assignment or task. Do the scope, audience, and type of online source meet the requirements?

Objectivity

Can you identify the political, ideological, cultural, or religious points of view of the source's authors, publishers, or sponsors? In a critique of other viewpoints, what kind of tone and language does the source use? Whose viewpoint is being expressed and what perspectives are left out?

Tip
Consider your own biases. We routinely favor information that confirms our existing beliefs (confirmation bias) and prioritize information that we can quickly remember over other information (availability heuristic).

Verifiability

Who are the experts on this topic and does your source reference these experts or reflect their points of view? Is the information covered by other sources? If the same information is repeated in many websites, it does not mean it is true. You should try to locate the *original source* of the information and evaluate its credibility, including supporting evidence.

Tip
Check the URL--it can tell you a lot about the web content.

https://www.example.com

Protocol	Subdomain	Domain	Top-level Domain
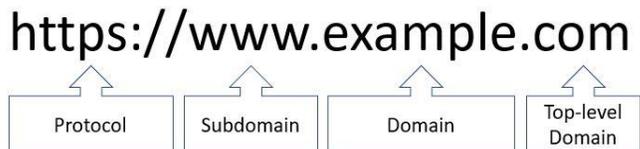
Examples of popular top-level domains (TLD) include .edu, .org, .net, .gov, .com, and .info. Keep in mind that the top-level domain does not tell you much about the reliability of information, but it does tell you the likely *type* of information you can expect to find in a source. For instance, the.edu suffix tells you that the material is published by an educational institution, but URLs with this suffix also include students' personal websites that are not vetted by the educational institutions hosting the content.

Also, pay attention to country code TLD, such as .ca or .uk, and consider the national origin of the information in your evaluation.

Notice how the domain of this URL https://www.justanswer.com/sip/microsoft should tell you that this is NOT a service provided by Microsoft, since Microsoft does appear in the domain name as it does here https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/.

Expertise

Are the editors/authors/contributors and their credentials clearly identified? What makes them experts on the topic? Consider factors such as educational credentials, and professional or personal experience.

Tip
Check if the source has an editorial policy or an explanation of how content is vetted. If sponsored content seamlessly blends in with other text and images, be skeptical of the source. For instance, in their [editorial policy](), the Canadian Cancer Society states that it maintains editorial independence from their corporate sponsors, which means the information the CCS provides is not altered or edited by their sponsors.

Newness

How current is the information on the website? Is it clear when the material was revised or updated?

For instance, this [Statistics Canada Labor Force Survey from August 2020]() has a publication or release date of 2020-09-04.

Review this [PROVEN handout]() for the original evaluation criteria that this video closely emulates. (You can find the link to the handout in the video description and the transcript.)

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