

Your Library Today



Mr. Breitsprecher's Edition

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Many Choices: Evaluate Information

Using digital search tools and the Internet to find information is fun and easy. Access to different resources is valuable. However, easy access means evaluating what we find is important.

When we have so many choices, we need to carefully choose what we use so that resources meet our needs.

Print resources offer real advantages. Publishers evaluate what they print. When credible publishers print information, they are providing a service. They are sharing their expertise.

Publishers evaluate information and determine if it reasonably meets needs or fulfills some legitimate purpose. Print costs are high – businesses are thoughtful about what they publish in print.

Publishers stake their reputations on the quality of the information they print. That does not mean everything we see in print is absolutely correct and useful, but it can mean that people accept the sources that information comes from. If a publisher is generally regarded as reliable, the print resources they create and that we choose to use are also generally accepted as reliable.

On the Web, it can be much more difficult to evaluate who actually is responsible for content. Anyone can set up a Website, even using different identities for different Websites. It costs virtually nothing to post information online.

We should be careful to evaluate all information we use, regardless of format. When we find information online, we need to assume responsibility for

Print Resources

In many cases, using traditional print resources like books, newspapers, magazines, and journals, will actually be easier than Websites. Remember, we can use databases like those at BadgerLink to easily search for print resources. These searches are at least as easy as an Internet search.

When we are using commonly accepted print resources like the *New York Times*, books published by *Bantam Publishing* and *Random House*, or periodicals like *Time* or *American Journal of Science*, the publishers of these sources have already evaluated information before we see it.

Yes, we need to evaluate all sources we use, but we will often find that print resources are more-widely accepted. Though there is a lot of good information on the Web, we have to accept responsibility for evaluating what we find and checking to see if others will accept our sources as legitimate.

It can be a little more work, but it is a valuable skill. Looking at information and determining if it is useful is important. The key to being successful in a digital world is to find good information – resources that will help you achieve what you want to accomplish.

evaluating the accuracy and usefulness of the information. Not every website is useful. Not every website intends to inform.

Let's look at 8 things to think about when evaluating information:

- Reliability
- Accuracy
- Authority
- Currency
- Fairness
- Adequacy
- Efficiency
- Organization

Reliability refers to trustworthiness. Reliable sources tell us where the information presented comes from. Reliable sources cite their sources – where they got the information they use. We want to find information that is balanced – we call this “unbiased.”

Biased information does not present the full story – it is not balanced. When information does not present different sides of an issue, be careful. Avoid using sources that are intended to sell something - they are biased and are not reliable.

Accuracy is about whether the information we find actually represents facts and figures. Accurate information can be verified – it can be fact-checked. When we check other sources, accurate information is consistent even when we find the facts and figures somewhere else.

Authority means asking why we should believe someone. First, we need to determine who is responsible for the information. Then we need to ask why they are believable – why they are qualified to give us facts and figures.

When evaluating information for authority, we are checking if what we have found meets reasonable standards, formats, and expectations for “experts” or professionals in that field.

Currency refers to verifying that information is still true. Even if it was accurate once, we need to know that it is still accurate today. Information we rely on and use needs to tell us when it is from.

We need to see that it is still accurate, useful, and relevant. Remember, in some content areas, information changes rapidly. Even if information has been recently published, we need to be sure it is still current enough for our purposes.

Fairness takes reliable one step farther – information can mean different things to different people. We want to be sure information we use respects different views people may have. Even when we don’t agree with different points of view, information is more useful when it acknowledges and respects the opinions of others.

When a subject is controversial, sources should present both positive and negative aspects of ideas. Stay away from sources that leave out information that would support alternative views.

Adequacy means that information is complete enough for your purpose. General overviews or statements of opinions are not really helpful because there is not enough supporting evidence to justify their conclusions.

Look for sources that present an adequate amount of data, facts, figures, and other evidence so that people can understand your topic and points of view.

Efficiency, as we are using it here, primarily refers to Websites. Web pages need to load reasonably quickly and without a lot of

Evaluating Information? Here’s a Checklist:

Thinking about the quality of information is important. It lets you get things done. Here are 7 questions to ask yourself about information you find:

- **Is it clear who has provided the information?** You cannot evaluate information unless you know the source of that information.
- **Are the aims of a Website or publisher clear?** There are different reasons information is posted online or published in print. Once you know who is responsible for information, ask yourself why they are sharing it.
- **Does the site or print resource achieve its aims?** For a source to work for you, it has to be effective for its original purpose. Is it?
- **Is the site relevant to me?** In a digital age, you can probably find many sources to choose from. Select sources that meet your needs
- **Can the information be checked?** If not, it probably isn’t useful. And if you do check it, do other sources agree with the facts, figures, and basic ideas?
- **Is the information reasonably current?** Things change – be sure the information you use is current. If it isn’t, it may no longer be accurate.
- **Is the information unbiased?** Be sure that information respects different opinions and ideas. Good sources are balanced.

distracting banners and pop-ups. If graphics are used, they should add to the presentation of information and not be distracting. Web sources should have navigation structures that are simple to understand and easy to use.

If you see technical glitches at a Website, it is probably better to find another source. Efficiency does apply to other formats too – most of us would not waste our time reading books or newspapers that are hard to follow and understand. Likewise, don’t use poorly designed Websites as sources.

Organization is important with all formats, print, digital, multimedia, and Web – we don’t bother to read books or reports when ideas are not organized. Don’t spend time with Web resources that are unorganized. Stay away from Websites that have more than a few dead links too. And if a Website requires you to constantly hit your browser’s BACK button, it is probably best to find another source.

If information is not structured in a way to make it useful, it is not a good

resource. Be sure to select sources where people have thought about how people will access and use the information being presented.

Conclusion

Internet search engines, databases, and computer library catalogs make it easier to find information. We can spend less time looking for sources when we need ideas and documentation for projects.

But finding more information and finding it quicker are not advantages unless we then carefully look at what we find and choose the best resources for our needs. Carefully selecting sources also makes it easier to finish our projects.

Yes, you will save time using computer technology to find information. Use some of the time you save evaluating what you find.

Choose sources that clearly state information. Choose sources that others will accept as legitimate. Choose sources that are organized to help you successfully complete your project.