Research with the Web

Evaluating Web Sites...
Know your APC’s: Authority, Purpose, and Currency

Almost any kind of document can be found on the Web. Web sites can be official government documents, opinionated blogs, specialized academic research, advertisements, newspapers, parodies, and political lobbying sites, to name just a few. It is important to realize that not all information on the Web has the same degree of reliability. When evaluating Web sites, it is important to know your APC’s:

Authority
- Who is the author? What are the author’s credentials?
- Is the author affiliated with a larger institution?
- Is the contact information provided to either mail or email the creator for further information?
Knowing who the author is can establish how much expertise the author has on the topic and what biases the author might have. Information on authority often can be found in the “About” or “Contact” section of a Web site.

Purpose
- Why was this site created?
- For whom is this site intended?
- Is the author trying to sell a product or service?
- Is the author affiliated with an organization interested in promoting its own ideas?
- Does the site link to other authoritative sites on the same topic?
Sometimes a site will indicate its point of view in the “About” section. Other times, a site will have bias or errors that are harder to spot. Considering the tone of the site, comparing the site to information in other sources, and considering what sort of site it is are some ways to check.

Currency
- When was the site created?
- When was the last time the site was updated?
- Are the links to other sites still active?
  Tip: Dead links are a sign that the Web site is not updated regularly. This should lead you to question the currency of the other information on the site.
For many topics, old information can be out-of-date and no longer accurate. Information about currency is often found by scrolling to the bottom of the home page. It may contain a date created, date last updated, or a copyright date.
Search Engine Shortcuts

Advanced Search
Almost every search engine has a link for an advanced search screen. The advanced search often helps to get rid of irrelevant results from a search engine. Here are some examples of ways to take advantage of advanced searches.

The exact phrase: Finding the source for a quotation, song lyrics, or other phrases is a lot easier with the exact phrase limit. Teachers sometimes use exact phrase searching to check if a phrase was plagiarized off a Web site. Exact phrase searching can also be done from the basic search screen by putting quotation marks, " ", around the phrase.

None of these words: One way to get rid of irrelevant results is to search for items that don’t contain a particular word. From the basic search screen, it can be done by putting a minus sign, -, in front of each word to exclude. For example, a search for matrix, not the movie, might be for matrix -movie -Reeves -trilogy.

Domain: This limit makes it possible to search for results within a particular Web site or within a particular type of site. It is useful for finding information contained on a specific Web site, even when that site doesn’t include its own search box.

Language: Even when a non-English language search is typed into a search engine, often a lot of English-language results appear. If the goal is to find sites in another language, restricting the search to that language really helps.

Images, Video, Maps, News, etc.
Most search engines a link have links to search for specific types of material. These links automatically narrow the results down. Aside from saving the effort of typing, “Pictures of…”, “Videos of…”, or “News about…”, or “Maps of…” these links ensure that just that type of result is found and eliminate results that might contain those words but not be that type of material.

Tip: A regular search engine is good for finding lots of things on the Web, but when the results need to be peer-reviewed sources, a specialized tool usually is better.
Some of these tools are databases that the library pays for which can be found via the library’s Web site. Some of these tools are free for searching on the Web:

Google Scholar, http://scholar.google.com/, is useful for finding research in many subject areas.
Often, after a peer-reviewed source is found, it can only be accessed by using the library or by paying for it.
Ask a Librarian, http://libguides.lib.siu.edu/askalibrarian, for advice about which tool would be best.