

FINDING AND USING INFORMATION ON THE INTERNET

Search Engines

The first step in using the Internet to conduct research is finding what you are looking for using a search engine. A search engine uses software to quickly browse millions of web pages, searching for key words entered by the user. Increasingly sophisticated search software allows users to enter and locate ever more specific and relevant information. The following is a partial list of some of the best search engines on the Internet:

- [Google](#)
- [Yahoo](#)
- [KartOO](#)
- [Internet Archive](#)
- [Ask](#)
- [FindArticles](#)
- [DayPop](#)
- [Lycos](#)
- [Excite](#)
- [HotBot](#)

MetaSearch Engines search several search engines at once:

- [Vivisimo](#)
- [SurfWax](#)
- [Info.Com](#)
- [DogPile](#)
- [MetaCrawler](#)
- [ZapMeta](#)
- [Fegan Finder Image Search](#)
- [Mr Apo](#)

Finding exactly what you are looking for on the Internet often involves a process of trial and error. And, sometimes you don't know what you can find until you start looking. Spend some time using one of the above search engines once you have an idea of what you want to investigate, then use the guide below to choose pages that are mostly likely to be reliable, credible and authoritative.

What does the URL tell you?

Before you leave the list of search results provided by the search engine, take a close look at the URL (Uniform Resource Locator, or web address line) of each suggested page. Check the last few letters of the URL to determine what type of domain (educational, nonprofit, commercial, government, etc.) the page comes from. Educational sites associated with institutions of higher learning occupy the domain

indicated by .edu; for government sites, look for .gov or .mil; for nonprofit organizations, look for .org (though this is no longer restricted to nonprofits). Commercial sites typically end in .com (though there is great variety in this domain). Many [country codes](#), such as .us, .uk and .de, are no longer tightly controlled and may be misused. Ask yourself if the domain extension is appropriate for the content.

If the URL contains a personal name (e.g., *pmartinez* or *reilly*) following a tilde (~), a percent sign (%), or the words “users,” “members” or “people,” the page is someone’s personal page. Also, domain names from a commercial ISP (Internet service provider such as aol.com or geocities.com) usually indicate a personal page. You will need to decide what kind of information source is most reliable for your topic.

Evaluating the reliability of the web page

Once you click on the web page, there are several techniques that will help you determine the quality and reliability of the information presented. Scan the perimeter of the page, looking for links labeled “About Us,” “Philosophy,” “Background,” or “Biography.”

Try to determine who wrote the page. Look for the name of the author, or the name of the organization, institution, agency, or group responsible for the page. If there is no individual author, look for an agency or organization that claims responsibility for the page. If you cannot find a responsible party, locate the publisher by truncating back the URL. In the address box at the top of the page, delete the end characters of the URL, stopping just before each / (leave the slash). Press enter to see if more is revealed about the author or the origins and nature of the site providing the page. Continue this process, one slash (/) at a time, until you reach the first single / which is preceded by the domain name portion. This is the page’s server or “publisher.” Does this publisher claim responsibility for the content? Does the publisher explain why the page exists? You are looking for someone who claims accountability and responsibility for the page’s content.

Use a search engine to find more information on the author, organization, institution, agency or group responsible for the web page you are using. Anyone can post anything on the web at low cost in just a few minutes. Your task is to determine whether your sources of information are reliable and authoritative. Many web pages merely offer opinion, or may present distorted or exaggerated information reflecting the bias of the author(s). Does the background or education of the author(s) qualify them as an authority on the topic? Is there reason to trust the contents of one web page over the contents of another? You should hold the author of a web page to the same degree of authority, credentials and documentation expected from a reputable print resource, whether book, journal article or a good newspaper. If you cannot find strong, relevant credentials, look very closely at the documentation of sources (see below).

Evaluating the quality of the information

In research or scholarly writing, the credibility of most work is demonstrated through footnote documentation or other means of revealing the sources of information. Saying what you believe without documentation is not much better than just expressing an

opinion or a point of view. Before relying on information gleaned from the Internet, employ a healthy skepticism regarding the quality and sources of information.

Look for a date indicating when the information was posted to the Internet. Oftentimes a “last updated” date appears on the bottom of the web page. Check the date on all the pages on the site. For some topics, you will need current information. In other instances, information posted nearer in time to the event under study will be necessary. How recent the date needs to be depends on your needs. Information on a time-sensitive or quickly-evolving subject can grow stale. At the same time, undated factual or statistical information is little better than anonymous information. In some cases, the date can tell you if the web page is still maintained or has been abandoned.

As with published scholarly or academic journals and books, you should expect documentation. Recent journal articles and other publications posted by the original publisher should contain copyright information of permissions to reproduce. Take time to explore footnotes and links in the text. What kinds of publications or sites are referenced? Are they reputable? Are they real? On the Internet it is possible to fabricate completely bogus references. Use a search engine to find more information on a website’s references or sources. The reliability and quality of links on a web page reflects on the reliability and quality of the page itself.

If information on the web page is reproduced from another source, try to determine if the information is complete, and not forged or faked. You may have to find the original to be sure a copy has not been altered. If the URL of the document is not to the original source, it is likely that it is illegally reproduced, and the text could be altered, even with the copyright information present.

Explore links from the web page to other resources on the topic. The links should be well chosen, well organized and annotated. Make sure the links work. Look to see if the links indicate a bias, or represent a variety of viewpoints. Well developed web pages invite you to compare their information with other pages. Always look for what is said and what is not said.

The Internet as research tool

The Internet is a wonderful resource, but the burden is on you — the Internet user — to establish the validity, timeliness and integrity of what you find there. The Internet is a public forum, open to all, providing a vast amount of information. Not all of the information on the Internet is suitable for research or scholarly work, however. Take the time to evaluate the reliability of any web page and the quality of any information that you find on the Internet. Think about why the website was created, and what the intentions of the author(s) are. Always be on the lookout for irony, satire, parody, fraud or falsehoods. Skepticism concerning the information that you discover on the Internet will not only save you from potential embarrassment, it will improve the quality of your research.

ADAPTED FROM:

Finding Information on the Internet: A Tutorial

<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Evaluate.html>