Evaluating Sources

Determine the relevance of sources

There is a sea of information out there on the internet and the key is being able to not drown in all this information and lose sight of your purpose. Penguin makes these suggestions.

You have to make a decision about what is important and relevant. Return to your research question and working thesis. You should be able to use your research question and working thesis to create guidelines for yourself about importance and relevance.

- Use these questions to determine the importance and relevance of your sources to your research question.
- Does your research question require you to consult primary sources or secondary sources?
- Does a source you have found support address your questions?
- Does a source support or disagree with your working thesis? (You should not throw out work that challenges your views)
- Is the material you have found persuasive?
- What indications of possible bias do you see in the source?

Determine the Reliability of Internet Sources

All electronic search tools share a common problem; they often give you too many sources. Web search engines not only pull up hits, but these hits may vary dramatically in quality. No one regulates or checks information put on the web, and it's no surprise that much of what is on the Web is highly opinionated or false. So you must examine the information closely.

Please use the following criteria sheet to evaluate web sources.

Criteria for evaluating Web sources

To evaluate the credibility of the site, you would need to examine the home page, not just the specific page you get to first. When you use a search engine to find a web page of interest usually you go deep into the site without having any sense of the context for that page. So here are some pointers to aid you in evaluating your possible source.

1. **Source**. Web sites sponsored by organizations are as reliable as print sources. For example, major newspapers now make some or all of their reportage available on the Web. If a Web site doesn't indicate ownership, then you have to make judgments about who put it up and why. The suffix

can offer clues: **.org** is used by organizations, including nonprofits, **.gov** by government bodies, and **.edu** by educational institutions, generally colleges and universities.

2. **Author**. Often Web sites give no information about their authors other than an email address, if that. In such cases it is difficult or impossible to determine the author's qualifications.
3. **Timelessness**. Many Web pages do not list when they were last updated; thus you cannot determine their currency. Furthermore, there are thousands of deserted ghosts cites on the Web – sites that the owners have abandoned but search engines still turn up.
4. **Evidence**. The accuracy of any evidence found on the web is often hard to verify. The most reliable information on the Web stands up to the tests of print evaluation, with clear indication of the sponsoring organization. Any factual information should be supported by indicating where the information came from. Reliable Web sites that offer information will list their sources.
5. **Biases**. Many Web sites announce their viewpoint on controversial issues, but others conceal their attitude with a reasonable tone and seemingly factual evidence such as statistics. Citations and bibliographies do not ensure that a site is reliable. Look carefully at the links and sources cited.
6. **Advertising**. Many Web sites are infomercials aimed at getting you to buy a product or service. While they might contain useful information, they are no more trustworthy than other forms of advertising.

Tips for Web searches

HELP! My search turned up too many results

- Try more specific search terms.
- Combine words with AND
- Use a phrase within quotation marks or specify "the exact phrase"
- Specify NOT for terms you are not interested in finding.
- Limit the search by a date range.

HELP! My search turned up too few results.

- Check your spelling.
- Try broader search terms.
- Use OR instead of AND, or specify "find any of the words"
- Try another index or search engine.