

Evaluating Web Sites for Use in Research Papers

How valuable is the information for your purposes?

- ✓ Some sites go wide; some go **deep**. For most papers at RBC, you'll want "deep."
What is deep?
 - Does the article have citations? What kind of documents does it cite?
 - Is it written for college-level research, or for casual reading?
 - Does it have vocabulary that makes you pause, or look up words in a dictionary (maybe it should)?
- ✓ Some sites are interesting but not suitable for citation. Wikipedia is useful, and not a bad place to start, but it is best left out of research papers.
- ✓ Some sites are parodies. Make sure you don't take the bait.
- ✓ Some sites are simply out of date. **When was the last update?**
- ✓ Some sites are **inaccurate**.
How can you tell? You can't always. For writing a paper though, avoid sites with:
 - spelling errors,
 - extreme and controversial claims,
 - writers that claim to have exclusive knowledge or unlock or reveal secrets,
 - sites that state upfront that everyone else is wrong,
 - sites that are polemic in nature (looking for a fight).

It could be that you will miss some good information by applying some of these criteria, but you will usually avoid problems and make your own life easier by being a little more exclusive.

Authority. Is the site suitable for citation in an academic paper?

Consider the source:

- ✓ Who sponsors this site?
- ✓ What is the site's domain? Prefer .edu or .org and .net domains. **.com** might be shaped by commercial interests. *Be flexible about this criterion.*
- ✓ Affiliation with an institution—a college or university, a professional organization or society, a think-tank, a flagship institution, a headquarters, etc. *Be less flexible about this.* An unaffiliated Web site with no board of reference or directors might be a poor source for research.

(Some RBC instructors do not allow citation from sources with no board, unless cleared by the instructor.)

- ✓ Are these signed articles by authors with verifiable credentials?

(Some RBC instructors do not allow citation of unsigned articles unless cleared by the instructor.)

- Do an independent Web search on the author's name. Who is this person: unknown, well-known, a self-promoter? Do the author's credentials match the field in which the author is making authoritative statements?
- Credentials might include advanced academic degrees from accredited universities, historical acceptance, recognized experience, leadership in appropriate organizations and movements, writing that has been reviewed professionally, biographical authority (life-story, say a holocaust survivor or eyewitness). What kind of credentials a writer needs depends upon the nature of the material you are citing. Be leery of self-proclaimed authority—look for endorsements.