

Search for Reliable Sites

As you will see below in Section 2.5, one of the indicators of the quality of information is its source. We tend to believe those who have knowledge and experience in a subject over those who are expressing the opinion of the day. It is reasonable, then, that organizations specializing in a subject are likely to have better information than a Web page posted by an individual. To begin your topic search, rather than typing in a search phrase and seeing what pages come up, start by looking for sites (that is, organizations) related to your topic. A profitable way to do this is to use your favorite search tool, such as Google or Ask or Yahoo, to type in your topic followed by one of these words: *institute, association, forum, foundation, institution*. For example, if you will be writing about peace and conflict in the Middle East, typing in *middle east institute* will return a number of organizations dealing with the Middle East. Try your search topic with each of the other words to locate more organizations.

Another way to locate information from organizations is to use the advanced search commands in the search tool to limit the search results to items in the .org and .gov domains. (The .org domain is for organizations, mostly nonprofit; the .gov domain is for government agencies.)

Look Deeply Into the Results

It is true that the major search engines are constantly tweaking their secret methods of ranking pages so that the best pages appear earliest in the results. However, unlike directories, search engines use computer-based formulas to do the ranking, so many times the pages that you want will be well after the first 10 or 20 displayed by the search tool. Good advice is to (1) craft your search phrase carefully, (2) use more than one phrase, and (3) take the time to look at the first 100 to 200 hits for each query. (Looking at 200 hits might seem like a lot, but it doesn't take as long as you might think.) You can set some of the search engines to return 50 or 100 hits on each page, making scrolling through a large number much more efficient.

Understand the Context of Individual Pages

When you perform a general Web search, do not just grab a page that looks good and use it in your paper. Take some time to discover the context of the page. Try backing up your browser one directory at a time by cutting off each previous directory to see what larger site the page is part of. (Note: If you have the Google toolbar installed in your browser, you can click on the Web *Up* button to go back one folder with each click.)

It may be useful to look at the root Web site of the information, also. On the home page of the root site, you will often find an *About* link that will give you some information about the site and its purpose. This may be helpful as you judge the site's quality.

Remember, too, that blog postings range in quality from the word of experts to groundless rantings to intentional falsehoods designed for good or ill (stock price manipulation, for example) to plagiarized pieces of the writings of others. Be very careful to assess the quality of such sources before you make use of them.

Follow the Links

Use quality information to find other quality information. When you locate a site or article that you find valuable and credible, visit the links from there to the other information. Not all links are recommendations, of course, but another page deemed worth linking to by a site you find valuable can provide a good possibility for finding more useful and reliable information related to your topic.

Use the Invisible Web

A substantial amount of information posted on the Web is not indexed by the search engines. To get to this information, on the invisible or deep Web, you must go directly to the various sites that host the information. The extra effort needed to access this information is rewarded by the fact that this information is usually high in quality.

To get access to this restricted information, perform a typical Web browser search on the following terms:

- ◆ “invisible web”
- ◆ “deep web”
- ◆ “invisible web databases”
- ◆ “how to search the invisible web”
- ◆ “hidden web”
- ◆ “locate invisible web databases”
- ◆ “deep web research databases”

Why is most of the Internet hidden behind security? Many sites want users to join (often free) before accessing their content. The reasons vary:

- ◆ The site might have a “no robots” command on its pages, preventing search engines from indexing them.
- ◆ The site might be hidden behind a password setup, so you will need to join first. The good news is that many of these sites are free.
- ◆ The site maintains a huge database and its owners do not want to show their information to just anyone.

2.5 Evaluating Sources

Implied above is the idea that sources should be examined for quality before using them. As more and more information becomes available, the range in quality—from treasure to trash—seems to be growing wider. It is increasingly important, then, to apply some effective criteria to the evaluation of each potential source you encounter. Here is one set, known as the EAR test, for Expertise, Accuracy, and Reliability.

Expertise

The first check of a source should relate to the author's credentials. Is the author an authority in the area, an expert, through education, experience, or both? If not, is the

author at least well informed about the area and aware of all the relevant issues? If there is a corporate author, is the organization widely respected or an authority? Does the way the author handles the subject indicate a knowledgeable, reasonable, and careful thinker? Often, an institutional affiliation will indicate an expert source. For example, a page on the Web site of a chemical manufacturer describing how to mix ingredients to make shampoo should be highly authoritative.

The expertise test: Is there evidence that the source knows the subject?

Accuracy

The next check of a source should relate to accuracy, which includes two parts. First is the currency of the information. Is the information up-to-date? In some areas (technology, business), information becomes outdated rapidly. In other areas (some historical work and literary scholarship), the information remains accurate for long periods. Outdated information can be worse than no information because it can be misleading. Check the date of the source and the date of the information in the source to be sure the information is recent enough for your needs. For example, there was once a concern that LCD televisions could not respond to fast motion quickly enough, resulting in smearing. Reviews of LCD TVs reflected this. Today, after many new generations of LCD TVs, that concern has long been resolved as much faster refresh rates have eliminated smearing. However, some of the older reviews are still online, presenting outdated information.

The second part of accuracy relates to correctness: Are the facts right, are the essential details present, is the presentation unbiased, is the whole picture presented? Be careful of sources that describe everything in sweeping generalizations and that lack details.

The accuracy test: Is the information correct today?

A note on biased sources: There are many areas of controversy, not just in politics, religion, and philosophy, but in science and social science as well, where at least some of your sources will be somewhat or even highly biased. You can use biased sources, as long as you are aware of the bias and seek out opposing viewpoints (which may be biased as well). However, sources that argue for a controversial position while ignoring conflicting evidence or arguments should be used cautiously because failure to acknowledge and respond to opposing viewpoints can imply a less than honest argument.

Reliability

The reliability test begins with a look at the source's documentation (bibliography) to see whether the information is well supported. Some sources will have little documentation because the material is a reasoned argument or a report on an original study or empirical investigation. Usually, though, there will be at least some indication of what other books and articles the authors made use of or recommend for further reading.

CRITICAL TIP

Don't automatically believe something just because:

- ◆ you have heard it often
- ◆ it's been around a long time
- ◆ it's new
- ◆ one study says it's true

sources could be all wrong and the fourth, conflicting source could be correct. Nevertheless, the test is generally a good guideline.

The reliability test: Is the information supported by other sources?

Evaluating your sources can be challenging. However, as I mentioned in the first chapter (Section 1.2), working with sources improves your ability to "analyze what you are reading." In other words, the more research and writing you do, the better you will become at evaluating the source material you find. You'll develop what some have called a Baloney Detector, an almost intuitive sense that will allow you to sniff out the less reliable sources from the more reliable. So don't confine yourself to the evaluation process outlined here. Devise your own system.

Review Questions

To see how well you understand this chapter, attempt to answer each of the following questions without referring to the text. (Write down your answers to make checking easier.) Then check your answers with the text. If you missed something important, add it to your answer.

1. What is the Ladder of Generalization? Give some examples to clarify.
2. In addition to facts, what other kinds of information will be useful to include in a research paper?
3. Distinguish between primary and secondary sources. Give examples.
4. How does quoting a standard dictionary definition weaken a paper?
5. What are some techniques for locating high-quality information on the Internet?
6. Explain the importance of evaluating sources.