

Website Evaluation Checklist

This Website Evaluation Checklist is a tool created to develop strategies for critically evaluating online information resources by asking three key questions:

- 1 - Does the content of the site appear to be useful?*
 - 2 - What is the site's apparent purpose?*
 - 3 - How reliable is the information?*
-

➡ General Information

Your Name:

Research topic/question:

➡ Quick Scan

A "Quick Scan" helps students decide, in just a few moments, whether a given website has potential value. A "yes" answer here means students should continue the evaluation, and a "no" means they should search for another site.

Can you read and understand the text on this page? yes | no

A literacy piece — students should be able to read and comprehend at least 85% of the text on a given page. If they cannot, then they may miss important context clues that bear on the reliability of the content.

Does this page contain information you might use? yes | no

Another literacy piece — assuming an adequate level of general comprehension, students should be able to scan the text for potentially useful information.

Is the information current enough for your purposes? yes | no

Students must first decide whether a given piece of information is time-sensitive, and what would be an acceptable level of currency. Scan the page for "Last update" information. Other references should note publication dates.

➡ Site Analysis

Site Name:

The site name is NOT the same as the URL. It will usually be found in a banner or heading at the top of the page.

URL:

URL stands for "Universal Resource Locator," generally known as a web address. Web addresses themselves contain a good bit of useful information regarding the sources of the material and potential biases and agendas (institutional or personal) that may impact the overall reliability of the information found on a given site. The diagram on the last page describes in more detail how to "read" a web address.

Domain name:

Domain names are usually chosen only for their name recognition value. It is the first thing a search engine scans for. Site developers acquire domain names by simply buying the rights to them, often trapping the unwary web surfer with a benign-sounding URL. In one of the more egregious examples of this ploy, the domain name "martinlutherking.org" is owned by a white supremacist group.

Extension:

Extensions provide clues about the organizational roots of a website: government-sponsored sites contain .gov, military sites contain .mil, educational institutions .edu, non-profit organizations .org, and so on. The chart on the last page contains a more comprehensive list of extensions and their common affiliations.

Page name:

On most websites, the page name appears at the very top of the browser window. It will also appear as the very last item in the URL, typically followed by the suffix .html or .htm.

Site sponsor and/or author:

The sponsor may be identified in the domain name itself, or elsewhere on the first (index) page. The author may be solely responsible for the content, or may be an agent of the sponsoring organization. Information from established,

responsible, institutional sources is generally reliable, but may reflect institutional biases. Be wary of the “sponsored links” that appear prominently on most search result pages. These almost always exist to sell you something.

Is this a personal page? yes | no | unsure

As the diagram illustrates, a tilde (~) is a good indicator you’re looking at a personal page. Other clues include percent signs (%) and such words as “users,” “members,” “people,” and so on. Using information from a personal page is not necessarily a bad thing, but you need to examine the content carefully. It’s wise to research the author’s credentials and to cross-check personal page information with other resources.

Explain your reasoning:

How can you justify this claim? What cues can you find in the URL or elsewhere on the page?

The main purpose of this website is to:

supply information | provide a service | state an opinion | sell a product | entertain | unsure

Most websites do have a primary focus, and information found there will be presented in ways that support that focus. Since the purpose of online research is to obtain information, websites whose primary focus is something other than supplying information must be more carefully screened for biases that reflect that focus. Consumer Reports and the Ford Motor Company may both have similar information on the latest Ford pickup trucks, but their slants will differ.

Explain your reasoning:

How can you justify this claim? What cues can you find in the URL or elsewhere on the page?

➡ Content Analysis

Given the results of your site analysis, how might this information be biased?

Unless we’re dealing with simple facts (When is your birthday? What’s the chemical formula for water?) we can assume that most of what we read is biased to some extent. If students are aware of the mechanisms through which the information they are seeking has been filtered, they’ll make better judgments about its usefulness for their purposes.

The relevant information on this site is: primary source | secondary source | both

A primary source is a document which describes an event by its witnesses or first recorders. Some types are: diaries, speeches, letters, interviews, newspapers, autobiographies and official records including government publications, legislation, court reports, etc. Secondary sources are one step removed from the event being described, but can provide background for or clarification of primary sources. Some types are: textbooks, journal articles, histories, criticisms, commentaries, and encyclopedias.

Are additional sources of information provided? yes | no

These may consist of links to other online resources or bibliographic references to print materials. Their very presence on the page indicates that the author is making some attempt to validate his/her claims. You should examine these to verify that links work and that other reference materials do in fact exist.

If “yes,” list two or three sources you might use.

The number and type of referenced resources your students consult depends on the degree of rigor you expect, but students should definitely check the content of at least two of these sources to see if they truly support claims made on the original site.

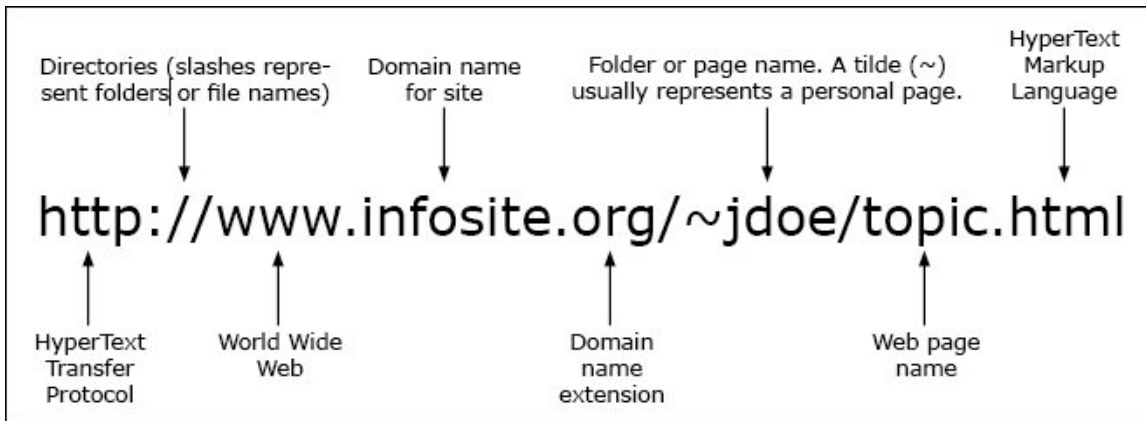
How much useful information did you find here? just a little | quite a bit | all I need

This depends largely on the type of information sought. Answers to the question, “Why did Hitler want to eradicate the Jews?” will require more in-depth analysis than “How many Jews died in the Holocaust?”

Rate the quality of the information on this site: poor | adequate | good | excellent

The information gathered to this point in the evaluation provides the raw material for making these judgements. Is the originating domain one that is likely to contain good information on topics of this sort? Is the site sponsor generally reputable? Do the author’s credentials inspire confidence? Is the writing clear and unambiguous? Is there evidence of bias? Is the information verifiable? Is it current enough to be useful? Do referenced materials support the author’s claims? Are these materials themselves credible? If all of this checks out, you’ve probably found a reliable resource.

➡ Reading a URL



Truncating a URL can provide insights into the nature of the entity sponsoring a website. To do this, simply delete all text following the domain name extension and reload the page. In the example shown above, the truncated URL would read:

`http://www.infosite.org/`

➡ Common Domain Name Extensions

For a more comprehensive list, including country extensions, visit:

<http://www.computeruser.com/resources/dictionary/noframes/nf.domains.html>

- .ac — educational network (same as .edu)
- .biz — business
- .com — commercial site in the US
- .edu — educational site in the US
- .firm —business
- .gov — U.S. government
- .int — international institution
- .mil — U.S. military
- .nato — NATO site
- .net — administrative site in the US
- .nom — personal site
- .org — organization in the US
- .store — retail business
- .web — about the World Wide Web

Developed by MSAD#54 Technology Integrationists
Laura Richter
Dorothy Small
Steve Chaisson