CHOOSING CREDIBLE SOURCES

When a writer uses a book or published article as a source in a research paper, there are not many questions to ask about the credibility of that source. Many editors have gone through the evaluation process before publication. Using books and the library databases as your first line of research options is a good strategy.

The Web, however, is different. Anyone can put any information on the Web, and sometimes information looks more credible at first glance than it is on closer inspection. Ask yourself, "Is this source credible?" every time you choose a Web source. This is especially true of sources with no author or organizational affiliation. You will likely have to navigate to the homepage of the site to judge its credibility. From a single page within a site, it is difficult to determine much about it. Traveling to the home page will yield much more useful information.

One smart way to use the Web is to begin with sources you know are credible. For example, imagine an essay about blood donation. The writer could Google "blood donation," which would result in any number of pages with various degrees of credibility. Or, the writer could think about what organizations might have good information about the topic, such as the Red Cross, the Mayo Clinic, or the National Institutes of Health. The writer could travel to those Web sites and look for information there first without much fear of coming across poor quality information.

Ways to Determine Credibility

Home page

Always look at the home page, or main page, of any Web site. Look for a link that says "home" or enter the Web address only through the domain name. For example, if you were on the page http://www.amnesty.org/en/demand-dignity, you would delete the information from the end to result in http://www.amnesty.org. On the home page, you can find more information. Especially check out the "About Us" link, which will sometimes reveal the author or sponsor.

Author

Look for who the author is and what you can find out about that person or organization. What are the author's qualifications? If there is no author, think twice before using the source.

Sponsor

Look for who owns the site. Is it a reputable group or organization? If so, that is a good sign, even if no individual author is listed. If you cannot tell what group or individual developed the site, think twice before using the source.

Date

Is the information current? For many disciplines, the currency of information is vital.

Documentation

Does the source tell readers where its facts are from? If the source mentions many details or statistics with no documentation, be wary.

Type of site

Determine the type of site you are considering.

Is it a database or other site recommended by the library? Sources retrieved through Jacobs Library are credible.

Is this a blog or homepage owned by an individual person? If so, you want to avoid it unless you can verify the person's credentials.

Is it a wiki? A wiki is a Web site where any user can modify the information, and thus there is no way to verify authorship. Examples of wikis include Wikipedia, Wiktionary, and Wikiquotes. These sources may provide a general overview or lead to more credible sources, but avoid using them in an essay.

Is it an online periodical or online version of a print publication? Examples of online periodicals include Slate.com, Salon.com, and Wired.com, and examples of print publications on the Web include Nytimes.com and Newsweek.com. If you are using a periodical on the Web, you can feel more secure.

Ways *Not* to Determine Credibility

Search engine

Do not assume that the top results from a search engine list are necessarily credible. Search engines have different methods for organizing and ordering results. You are likely just looking at the most popular results, not the best ones.

.org or .edu

Do not rely on just the domain type to determine credibility. Anyone can begin their own .org website; the .org itself does not indicate the quality of the source. Many pages on .edu domains are created by students and are thus not the best sources to cite.