QUALITY COUNTS! A BRIEF GUIDE TO EVALUATING RESOURCES FOR DMACC URBAN CAMPUS STUDENTS

As a college student, you will need to find information from published sources for many kinds of assignments—essays, reports, speeches, and other class projects. Information is available from lots of sources: Internet websites and blogs, television, movies, books, magazines, newspapers, research journals, and so on.

Books, popular magazines, scholarly research journals, newspapers and other print sources are almost always subject to editing, fact-checking, peer review or other quality-control measures before publication. This is also true of articles and other documents available through subscription databases provided by libraries to their users. These online resources are basically digital versions of print publications.

Information found on the Internet, however, is not subject to any kind of quality control. Literally anyone can put anything on the Web! Finding reliable information in the vast ocean of gossip, rumor, political propaganda, quack medicine, sales pitches and other questionable sites can be a frustrating, time-consuming task. On the other hand, there are many excellent sources of high-quality, reliable information to be found by the savvy Web searcher.

With so much information available in so many formats, how do you make wise choices? How can you tell whether the information is reliable?

Consider these basic criteria:

- **Authority**—Who created the resource? What is the reputation of the author, publisher, and/or producer? What is their affiliation or background? Are they qualified to provide information on this topic?

- **Accuracy**—Is the information reliable? Has it been subjected to any kind of editing, peer review, or other process to check for errors of fact? Can information presented as factual be verified in another source?

- **Fairness**—Is the intent of the publication to inform, entertain, sell a product, or advocate a particular viewpoint? Can you detect bias in the content or presentation of the information? If the source does have biases, are they clearly stated?

- **Scope**—Is the coverage of the topic appropriate for your needs?

- **Currency**—For your topic, do you need up-to-date information? If so, is the date of publication recent enough?
EVALUATING PRINT RESOURCES

Print resources you’re likely to use for your class projects include books, magazines, newspapers, or scholarly research journals. The DMACC libraries have physical collections of these kinds of materials, as well as digital versions in our research databases. Tips for assessing the quality of print sources, based on the criteria described above, are discussed here.

Authority

Books and articles will often include some information about the author(s). This can help you decide whether they are qualified to present information about the topic.

Pay attention to the publisher of the book or periodical. Book publishers are usually identified on the title page. The company or organization that publishes a magazine or journal may be named on the cover or title page. If not, you can usually find it on one of the first few inside pages. You may recognize the names of well-known publishers.

You can get a feel for the reputability of a publication by checking a library database such as WorldCat to find out how many libraries have purchased materials from that company or subscribed to that periodical. Libraries usually make purchasing decisions based in part on the reputation of the publisher. Ownership by a large number of libraries, especially college and university libraries, is often an indicator of reputability.

Accuracy

Printed books, magazines, journals, and newspapers are usually edited and/or reviewed for errors prior to publication. Scholarly research journals have a more rigorous level of review than general interest publications, called peer review. In this process, panels of experts in the field evaluate the quality of the research and writing, and the standards for publication are usually very high.

If you consult several sources dealing with the same topic, you should find that statements of fact are in agreement. If you can verify factual information in multiple sources, it’s likely that the information is accurate.

If the source meets the criteria for authority, you can assume that the author and/or publisher has an interest in maintaining their reputation for quality. They will work hard to avoid publishing inaccurate information.
**Fairness**

If you know something about the author or publisher, you can probably judge whether they tend to promote a particular point of view. Sometimes a book’s introduction or preface will clearly state the purpose of the work and the author’s views.

Look for bias in the language of the publication. A writer is likely to be presenting a slanted point of view if you see the following:

- Appeals to the reader’s emotions, not logic or intelligence
- Opinions stated as facts
- No consideration of other points of view
- Overgeneralizations, that is, “all” or “none” statements
- Exaggerated statements
- Use of stereotypes for persons or groups

An information source can be biased, but still be useful, as long as you recognize the point of view being offered and make sure to consult other sources for different opinions on the issue.

**Scope**

You also need to decide if the source meets your current information needs. Even if it meets the standards for authority, accuracy, and fairness, if it doesn’t fit your assignment or cover what you want, you probably won’t want to use it.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Does this source provide enough information?
- Who is the intended audience—adults or children, scholars or the general public, experts or novices?
- If you’re using the source for a class assignment, does it meet your instructor’s requirements?

**Currency**

Check the publication date to make sure the source is new enough for your needs.

You can usually find the publication date of a periodical on the cover and/or the table of contents page. For books, look on the front or back of the title page. If the book is a reprint (not an update) of an older publication, check for the original publication date.
EVALUATING INTERNET WEBSITES

When something is offered to the world on the Internet for free, you need to think about the motivation behind it. Is the information provided as a public service? Are you being sold a product or service? Is a particular cause or point of view being promoted? Is the information fact or opinion? Is the site humorous or satirical, or meant to be taken seriously?

Before looking at other aspects of a Web page, take a look at the URL, or electronic address, of the site. This address includes a three-letter code indicating the “domain” or type of organization sponsoring the site. This is an important clue for determining the purpose of the site. Some of the common domains you will find are described in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.edu</td>
<td>Indicates an educational institution. The purpose of the site is to present factual information, so it can normally be considered a reliable source. However, students or faculty may publish personal pages in their account which may not be endorsed by the institution. Personal pages usually include a tilde (~) in the URL.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.gov</td>
<td>Indicates a U.S. government agency. The purpose of the site is to present factual information. Government agencies publish legislation, census information, weather information, tax forms, statistics, reports, and many other kinds of documents. These are normally considered reliable information sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.org</td>
<td>Indicates a not-for-profit organization. These sites often promote a cause or attempt to influence public opinion on an issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.com</td>
<td>Indicates a commercial enterprise. These sites are usually promoting or selling a product or service. Some sites in this domain, such as news publications, provide quality information that you can purchase. Others, such as medical centers or research facilities, may offer reliable factual information as a public service.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consider the questions under each criterion below to help determine the quality of the Website. A higher number of “yes” answers increases the likelihood that the site is a reliable information source.

**Authority**

- Is it clear what institution, agency, organization, corporation, or individual is responsible for the page?
- Is there a link to a page describing the purpose, goals, or nature of the sponsoring entity?
- Is there a way to verify the legitimacy of the page’s sponsor or author? For example, is there a phone number, e-mail, or mailing address to contact for more information?
- Is there a statement giving the organization’s name as the copyright holder?
**Accuracy**

- Are the sources for factual information clearly listed so they can be verified elsewhere?
- Is the information free of grammatical, spelling, and typographical errors? (These kinds of errors are a strong indicator of a lack of quality control.)

**Fairness**

- Is the motivation for publishing the Website clearly stated?
- Is the information presented in a logical way, free of bias? (Note the indicators for bias in print publications described above.)
- If there is advertising on the page, is it clearly separate from the informational content?

**Scope**

- Does the page provide enough information for your needs?
- Is the intended audience appropriate for your use of the information?

**Currency**

- Are there dates on the page that show:
  o When the page was written?
  o When the page was first published on the Web?
  o When the page was last updated?
- Do the links on the page lead to active Web pages? (“Dead” links indicate the page hasn’t been updated recently.)
- Are there any other indications that the information on the page is kept current?