

Evaluating the credibility of online information

Credibility – the quality of being trusted and believable

Anyone can publish material on the internet, so it is essential that you think critically about the sources of information you consult to be sure you are relying on a trusted resource. In this module, you will learn how to identify credible sources of online information.

When visiting a site with the intent of using the information to inform and guide your understanding of a subject, the answers to the following questions will help you judge site credibility. Ask yourself:

- 1. Has the author of the material been identified?**
- 2. What connection does the author have with the subject matter?**
- 3. Is there evidence that other sources of information have been consulted?**
- 4. Is the website current?**
- 5. Is there evidence of bias?**

Suggestions for interpreting the answers to these questions are discussed below. After reading, it should become easier for you to determine whether the information contained on a site you have visited is accurate and trustworthy.

1. Has the author of the material been identified?

- Is the name evident and are his/her credentials provided?
- Is the organization/institution that the author is associated with identified and recognizable?
- Is there contact information provided, i.e. email, phone, address?

If the answer to any of these questions is no, this is a red flag as to whether you should place value on the credibility of the information. Any person or institution that does not identify themselves with current contact information does not constitute a reliable source of information.

2. What connection does the author have with the subject matter?

- Is the author an expert on the subject?
- Has he/she published other material on the subject?
- Has the author been referred to by others or by another respected website or source?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, this offers evidence that information contained on the site is likely trustworthy.

3. Is there evidence that other sources of information have been consulted?

- Does the content include references to other related material?
- Are other sources of information acknowledged through the use of external links?
- Is there a reference list provided?

Evidence that the author has relied upon the work of others through citations and external links adds to the site's credibility.

4. Is the website current?

- Has it been recently updated?
- Are there broken links on the page?

Depending on the nature of the subject matter, the date that the information was last updated can say a lot about whether its contents are reliable. For example, for subject matter that is driven by innovation and technology, information that is mere days or months old may be

considered outdated. If there are indications that the site is not regularly maintained, you should question the credibility of the information. If a more up to date site dealing with the same subject matter is available, it may represent a more reliable source of information.

5. Is there evidence of bias?

- Does the site contain advertising? Is this advertising related to the content? If so, you need to consider the motive or intent behind the material.
- Does the site only present one point of view? Do you think there is a reason why this particular point of view is being supported?

If you feel that the information presented is biased and only presents “one side of the story”, then you should be wary of relying too heavily on the content to guide or inform your decisions.

One final thought....

The quality of information obtained from a search engine will vary greatly. You must seriously consider whether or not the subject area you are researching can be accurately examined using sources found through a search engine alone. Many times, there are more reliable sources of information available in books and journals that should form the basis of your understanding.

The assessment tool provided below is one way you can gauge the credibility of the sites you visit for research and information purposes. It is meant to provide a starting point to get you thinking about online source credibility. It does NOT represent a substitute for developing your own set of guiding principles for determining the credibility of sources used for academic purposes.

Check out the Source Educational Evaluation Rubric (SEER) by *Turnitin* found at the end of this section for a tool that you can use to score the credibility of the web pages that you visit.

Source Educational Evaluation Rubric (SEER)

Download the full study at http://pages.turnitin.com/evaluating_sources.html

	Highly Credible		Credible		Discreditable
	4	3	2	1	0
AUTHORITATIVE Criteria Weight	Highly-regarded site that is referenced and linked to by others. Information is well-referenced, cited, and written by authors with expertise in the content area	Well-regarded site that is well known in its category. Information is referenced and cited, with experts generating content	Regarded site that has reputable information that is referenced and cited	Site is slightly regarded--does not necessarily have information that is researched, referenced, or cited	Site is not regarded--information or resources provided are not researched, referenced, or cited
EDUCATIONAL VALUE Criteria Weight	Site is a leading source of content that exceeds instructional goals	Site is a regarded source of content that meets instructional goals	Site content meets instructional goals	Site content does not meet instructional goals	Site content is inappropriate or actively subverts instructional goals
INTENT Criteria Weight	Site is a highly-respected source of content provided to inform users	Site is a well-regarded source of information whose job is to inform	Site provides content to inform users	Site promotes content; the goal of the site is not to "inform" users	Site actively sells content
ORIGINALITY Criteria Weight	Site is a primary source of original content and viewpoints	Site offers original content and viewpoints	Site offers some original content, combining it with repurposed content	Site aggregates or repurposes content	Site aggregates or repurposes content without appropriate citation or references
QUALITY Criteria Weight	Site content is high quality (vetted, researched, and informed) and enough content is provided to establish good coverage	Site content is of good quality and there is good content area coverage	Site content is of quality and there is some broader content coverage	Site content quality is lacking and good content is in limited quantity	Quality of content is questionable. Lack of quality information available.

Rubric Score _____ Rubric Percentage _____



SEER by Turnitin is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 Unported License.
Based on a work at http://pages.turnitin.com/seer_rubric.html.

Examples

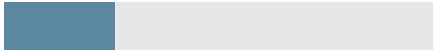
Below are three examples of SEER in practice. We evaluated three popular sites that appear in both secondary and higher education papers. A total of 300 sites were reviewed as part of this study. Included in the analysis is the ranking by criterion, the number of matches this site produced against Turnitin's index of the Web, and the overall score of the site based on SEER.

HIGHLY CREDIBLE

The New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com>

of Matches in Student Papers: 768,584



Total SEER Score: 3.6



CREDIBLE

eNotes

<http://www.enotes.com/>

of Matches in Student Papers: 1,440,129



Total SEER Score: 2.20



DISCREDITABLE

123HelpMe.com

<http://123helpme.com>

of Matches in Student Papers: 2,370,843



Total SEER Score: 0.46



AUTHORITATIVE

4.0 Highly-regarded site that is referenced and linked to by others. Information is well-referenced, cited, and written by authors with expertise in the content area

AUTHORITATIVE

2.0 Regarded site that has reputable information that is referenced and cited

AUTHORITATIVE

0.5 Site is slightly regarded--does not necessarily have information that is researched, referenced, or cited

EDUCATIONAL VALUE

3.8 Site is a leading source of content that exceeds instructional goals

EDUCATIONAL VALUE

3.0 Site is a regarded source of content that meets instructional goals

EDUCATIONAL VALUE

0.8 Site content does not meet instructional goals

INTENT

3.3 Site is a highly-regarded source of information whose job is to inform

INTENT

1.3 Site promotes content; the goal of the site is not to "inform" users

INTENT

0 Site actively sells content

ORIGINALITY

3.5 Site is a primary source of original content and viewpoints

ORIGINALITY

2.5 Site offers original content and viewpoints

ORIGINALITY

0.8 Site aggregates or repurposes content

QUALITY

3.5 Site content is of good quality and there is a good content area coverage

QUALITY

2.3 Site content is of quality and there is some broader content coverage

QUALITY

0.3 Quality of content is questionable. Lack of quality information available.

The New York Times has an industry-leading reputation for accurate, timely, and unbiased reporting.

eNotes is a subscription-based site that offers authored content: literature study guides, lessons plans, literary criticism, and discussions for users. The content is original, authored and published by eNotes.

The intent of 123HelpMe.com is clearly to share and sell essays for student use. Because of the lack of author information or essay/article bylines, the quality of the content is questionable.