

## Evaluating Internet Sources

Hello, my name's David McCusker. I'm one of the librarians at American River College. Thanks for joining me for this quick tutorial on evaluating Internet sources.

Most of us feel very comfortable using the Internet. Using resources that are not so familiar to us, like the library's catalog to find books, or the library's databases to find journal articles, may seem time consuming or difficult. So why would you use those resources? What advantages would library resources have over the Internet?

One big advantage that library resources have over free Internet resources is that they've been evaluated. Books in the library and articles in the database have been through an evaluation process that gives some assurance of credibility and accuracy. Since anyone can put anything on the Internet, the only evaluation a website is going to go through is the one that you do, deciding whether or not to use it for your work.

Let's say I was writing an essay for my English class on gay marriage. I'll use Google to search for resources for my paper. The search returns millions of hits. How many hits do you usually look through? Maybe 20 or 30,000? Of course not. Most of us look through the first page or two. While there is almost certainly quality information that we could use for a college essay somewhere in these results, how long will it take us to find the quality info? There's no guarantee that the stuff that appears in the first one or two or even two hundred pages is appropriate for college level work. Consider all the time you'd spend sifting through junk on the Internet and evaluating websites to find good sources for your work. Not only will you do better work if you use library resources for your work, you'll save time.

Let's take a look at the first few hits. We get two hits from Wikipedia. What do you know about Wikipedia? It's an online encyclopedia, but what's the difference between this encyclopedia and an encyclopedia that you would find in the library? Entries in encyclopedias in the library are written by experts, whereas anyone can edit entries in

Wikipedia. You can see that we could start editing the page right now if we wanted to. If we look at the history, we can see that this entry has been edited dozens of times just in the last week. The fact that anyone can edit Wikipedia makes it inappropriate for college level work. If you were writing a paper on gay marriage, you wouldn't go up to a stranger on the street and ask, "Hey, what do you think about this whole gay marriage thing?" and then put the stranger's response in your paper. If you use Internet sources without carefully evaluating the source, that's essentially what you're doing. The only difference is that you're asking a stranger who has taken the time to make a website.

Let's take a look at another top Google hit, Gay Marriage, the arguments and the motives. A student who's new to college and is in a hurry to get done with their assignment might think to themselves, "Great. I found this nice long essay I can use for my paper." Where as of course, you know that we need to be asking ourselves, who wrote this? Is the author an authority on the topic? Can I easily find out who wrote it and what their credentials are? And if we're looking for more info about the author, we'd likely follow the link to the author's homepage and find - A different kind of cowboy, a different kind of homepage - this is not an appropriate source for a college paper at all, unless of course your paper is, "What do different kinds of cowboys think about gay marriage?" If that's your paper topic, maybe this site could be very useful for you, for almost any other topic, this site is not appropriate.

There are other factors that we need to consider in addition to authority. We need to consider the scope and content of the source. There's a saying about the Internet, that it's a mile wide but an inch deep. If you were to compare what information is available on the web on the topic of gay marriage or global warming to books on those topics or articles on those topics that you found using library sources, you'd see that there's a wealth of information available in the library sources, and often very little information on webpages on those topics. Many of the webpages will contain almost the same information as every other web source. Why do you think that might be? Again, when we do college level research, we'd like to get our information from people who are authorities on the topic. These experts would often much rather get the recognition and

rewards that come with writing a book or being published in a journal, than they would simply put their work online for free.

Other things to consider when using the web for academic work are whether or not the source is timely. Can you easily find when the webpage was last updated? Is it accurate? Remember that anyone can put anything on the web. Before you cite any website for a college paper, verify the information you found there in other sources that you know to be reliable. I'd recommend starting your research with books and journal articles before going to the web. Learning something about your topic before you search on the Internet will make it much easier to determine whether information on a website on your topic is accurate and useful.

A good option to consider for finding resources on the Internet appropriate for college work would be to use a subject directory, rather than a search engine. The results you get using a search engine are determined by the algorithm the search engine uses. When you use a subject directory, the results are determined by a human being who has selected websites on a topic. [www.lii.org](http://www.lii.org), the Librarians Index to the Internet would be a good choice. The results you get here have been selected by a librarian. If we run a search for gay marriage here, you'll see that we only get a few hits, but we know that the sites have gone through some evaluation process. Very few, if any, of these results were written by different kinds of cowboys.

I hope you've enjoyed this quick tutorial. I encourage you to try using a variety of different sources for your research and to carefully evaluate your sources. Please keep in mind that you can always visit the library or contact a librarian with any questions you have or that come up in your research.