JSTOR | *Research Basics*
for Students

MODULE 2: ESTABLISHING CREDIBILITY
LESSON 3: VERIFYING ONLINE SOURCES

Title

Establishing Credibility

Module 2, Lesson 3

Verifying Online Sources

Introduction

In this lesson, you'll learn how to assess the content of a website to determine whether it's appropriate for your academic research. We'll cover:

» How websites are similar to, and different from, other publications

» Concerns unique to content published online

» What a website's address can tell you about its credibility

» Where else on a webpage to look for the information you need

What's Out There

Information is published online for a variety of purposes. There are many types of websites, and not all of them will be appropriate for academic research.

» **Personal sites and blogs** are usually maintained by individuals for their own enjoyment. Although the author of a blog may have authority in his or her field, blog posts lack the indicators of scholarly publishing, such as peer review.

» **Commercial websites** are maintained by for-profit companies. It's important to remember this bias when assessing their credibility.

» **Informational websites** are maintained by organizations or institutions for the purpose of sharing research or other information. You'll need to think about what authority these sources have, in the real world as well as online.

» **News and journalism** online comes from a variety of sources, some more reliable than others.

Next, we'll look at how to begin distinguishing between these types of sites.

Authority

In Lessons 1 and 2, you learned how to evaluate sources using the A-B-Cs of authority, bias, and content. It's just as important to use these analytical tools when evaluating websites, because publishing online is so simple that virtually anyone can do it.

Let's explore how these ideas apply in the online context. First, we'll return to the idea of authority. Who wrote the content? Who created or sponsored the page?

A credible website should provide information about the person or organization responsible for its content. Just as with a published source, a website's author should have experience and credentials in his or her field, and the sponsoring organization should be well-established and respected in the field. You can also use a search engine to find additional information about an author if you're unsure. Most scholars will have some sort of presence online.

Some webpages may not list an author. This isn't necessarily a red flag; in this instance, the organization that owns the page is claiming authorship. So you will need to evaluate the organization in the same way you'd evaluate an author: Is the organization qualified to make statements about this topic? What is its background and experience? Does it exist (and is it well-known) outside of the web?

A credible site should be clear and up-front about who owns the site and how users can contact the owner. This information should be clearly visible.

Bias and Content

Just as with scholarly sources, sources you find online should be free of bias. Thinking about a website's purpose can help you determine whether its content might be biased.

Ask yourself: Why was the site created – to educate, to share information, to argue an opinion, to sell a product? Does the site make money from advertising? Is it trying to sell you something?

A credible website should have a mission statement or an "about" section that explains its purpose and discloses any conflicts of interest. If it contains advertising, ads should be clearly labeled.

Take a look at this example from the University of Michigan's Education Policy Initiative. The "History" and "Mission" sections explain why the site exists and what it does. The links that follow provide additional information about the sponsoring institution and the people who create the content.

Finally, content from a credible website should still meet your criteria for a scholarly work:

» It should be well-written and error-free

»   It should use appropriate language and a neutral tone

»   It should cite sources to support its assertions

Finding Additional Support
You can apply other strategies to assess online sources for credibility.

Currency

As with printed sources, currency is important in finding a credible website. As always, you should be able to find a publication date or date the site was last updated.

In an online setting, the site's appearance and functionality can sometimes provide clues to its currency. If the layout or graphics look dated, it's possible that the site has not been updated in a long time. A credible site should also be functional and relatively easy to use. If you are encountering lots of broken links or are unable to complete a search, that might be a clue that the site is out of date.

Sources

A credible site will usually provide references. Sometimes these may take the form of other links to high-quality websites or articles on the same topic, rather than a formal bibliography. You may also find links embedded in the text of an article, rather than listed at the end. These links can help you get a sense of the site's context, which we will discuss next.

Remember, it's possible that a credible source may not meet every single one of the criteria we've discussed here. But looking for these pieces of information is a good way to get a sense of where a source is coming from, who is behind it, and what its purpose is.

Next, you will learn some specific ways to begin your assessment of whether a website is suitable for academic research.

Check the URL
Every webpage has a unique address called a URL (or uniform resource locator). The main part of a page's URL can sometimes give you a start on determining whether it's a good source.

In particular, a page with a .gov or .edu extension is more likely to come from a credible source. A website with a .gov extension, like www.ed.gov, may be used only by a United States government agency.

A website with a .edu extension, like www.umich.edu, may be used only by a college or university. However, .edu sites sometimes also host the personal content of professors or students – so you will need to explore carefully.

Other common extensions include .org, .com, and .net, among many others. Although .org and .com were originally intended to indicate nonprofit and for-profit status, respectively, there are no rules in place to enforce this distinction. So you can't make any assumptions based on a .org or .com address; you will need to delve further to find out who owns the source.

Check the Perimeter
When you're assessing a website for credibility, the information you need is often found around the edges of the page, especially the very top and very bottom. Take a look at this example, an abstract for an article about testing in schools.

A quick glance at the top of the page gives you some information about who is responsible for its content: it's produced by Education Policy Initiative, and the logo on the right is for the University of Michigan. So you know right away that this site is probably a good authority on the subject.

You also know that this is likely to be an unbiased source of information on this topic. Educational institutions usually exist to do research and share information, not to advance a certain viewpoint or sell a product.

There are clear and straightforward navigation options, including an "about us" link. Moving down the page, we see some other important information.

» There's a date to indicate when the content was published.

» The author's name is given, along with a link to more information about his affiliation and credentials.

» When we open the PDF of the article, we see it includes a list of references from scholarly and government sources.

There are many elements present to support this being a credible source for academic research.

Now let's look at a second webpage on the same topic of testing in schools. The top of the page tells us that the website belongs to the Association of Test Publishers. No author is named. Think about how the publisher here relates to the topic at hand. Does the publisher have authority? What about bias?

Now let's move to the bottom of the page. Scanning the text of the article, we see phrases like "Most…experts would agree" and references to the work of "independent researchers." But no citations or links are provided to support the author's assertions. And there's no indication that this content has been reviewed or edited by a peer in the field.

These things don't mean that there's necessarily anything incorrect or untrue in the article we're looking at. It simply means that we can't tell. While this company may have some authority in the field, it is inherently biased, and it hasn't provided any sources to back up the statements in the article. So our assessment of this source tells us that it's not appropriate for use in academic research.

Next Steps
Have you thought any more about the question we asked at the beginning of this module? Which source would you trust the most for information about a hurricane – Facebook, the evening news, or the website of the National Weather Service? Now that you've learned how to establish credibility, the answer may be clearer to you.

» Next, we're going to move into a few practice activities related to what you've just learned.

» Then, you'll take an assessment of what you've learned in Module 2.

» After you've completed these activities, it's time to move on to Module 3, where you will learn how to cite these sources in your academic papers.