



CHAPTER 6: EVALUATING ONLINE INFORMATION

The Internet is a vast treasure trove of information. You can use its Web sites, encyclopedias, and other reference resources to write a research paper without ever leaving your house.

However, when you find information on the Internet, you must evaluate it to determine if it is credible, accurate, reasonable, and supported. Anyone can put information on the Internet. No individual or organization edits, controls, or verifies all the information on the Internet; therefore, it's up to users to evaluate the information they find.

Preevaluation

You'll have better luck finding useful information online if you first take a few minutes to identify what you're looking for. Do you need facts, opinions, statistics, anecdotes, or support for arguments? Once you decide this, you'll be able to screen sources more quickly.

The CARS Checklist

The CARS Checklist (Credibility, Accuracy, Reasonableness, Support), created by Dr. Robert Harris, is a system for evaluating the quality of research information. By familiarizing yourself with the CARS criteria, you can tell a brilliant research source from a bogus one.

Credibility

When you are evaluating information on the Internet, authenticity is paramount. Because anyone can say anything online, you need to look for evidence of credibility.

Credibility Checklist

- Author's name, title, position, education, and/or training
- Author's contact information
- Date and/or version of the article

Warning Signs

- Author is anonymous; article is undated.
- Article has bad grammar and typographical errors.
- Web site is amateur or unprofessional.

Accuracy

Accuracy is the condition or quality of being true, correct, or exact. To ensure accuracy and that your research is free from error, use the following checklists.

Accuracy Checklist

- Timely
- Factual
- Detailed and comprehensive
- Specified or known purpose, intention, or audience

Warning Signs

- Undated
- Vagaries and generalizations
- Lack of details
- One-sided view

Reasonableness

Reasonableness is the condition of being fair, objective, moderate, and consistent. To ensure that your information is reasonable, use the following checklists.

Reasonableness Checklist

- Fair and balanced
- No conflict of interest

- Arguments are backed up by reason
- Neutral and objective tone

Warning Signs

- Grandiose claims
- Conflict of interest
- Arguments not backed up by reason
- Slanted tone, manipulative, or emotional language

Support

Support refers to the ability to corroborate the information from its source or other sources. Citing sources strengthens the credibility of the information.

Support Checklist

- Sources are listed and cited properly.
- Contact information is provided for sources.
- Claims are supported.
- Documentation is supplied.

Warning Signs

- Sources are not provided.
- You cannot corroborate the source elsewhere.
- You cannot find any other sources that present the same information.
- Claims are not supported by documentation.

References

Driscoll, D. L. (2007, July 18). *Evaluating sources of information*. Purdue Online Writing Lab. Retrieved October 13, 2007, from <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/553/01>

Harris, R. (1997, November 17). Evaluating Internet research sources. *VirtualSalt*. Retrieved October 13, 2007, from <http://www.virtualsalt.com/evalu8it.htm>