

- [Hi, Guest](#)
- [login](#)

Harvard Guide to Using Sources

A Publication of the Harvard College Writing Program

Harvard Guide to Using Sources: Evaluating Web Sources

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[< PREVIOUS](#) | [NEXT >](#)

Although you should generally begin your electronic research by using e-resources available through the Harvard Library, there may be times when you will want to use popular Web search engines like Google. The fact that a document appears on the Web doesn't make it accurate or objective, and therefore these search engines should be held to the same rigorous standards used by Harvard's librarians when they vet sources.

Because Web sources can be created by anyone and therefore are riskier in terms of their credibility and authority, they should always be evaluated according to the following criteria:

- **Who is the author of this site?**

As with any source, it's important to identify the author of a Web site and to become familiar with the author's qualifications. Be skeptical of any Web page that does not identify an author or invites you to contact an unnamed "Web master." If you are going to depend on this Web site as a source of information, you need to determine the author's credentials as well as the purpose and rationale for posting the site in the first place. For example, a Web site created to serve a particular viewpoint, or to make a monetary profit, might skew information for the author's own ends. In addition to considering the author, you should also consider the publishing body of the Web page—the place or server on which the document resides (or from which it originates). If this information isn't readily apparent, try backing up several levels (deleting from the right side of the URL). Is the Web document linked to a federal agency (.gov), a non-profit site (.org), an educational institution (.edu), or a business (.com)?

Always ask yourself whether the organization sponsoring a particular site is a known, reliable, and suitable site for the document—a research center, for example, a college or university, or a government office.

- **How accurate and objective is the site?**

If you are going to cite information found on a Web site, it's important to know whether you can trust the accuracy of the facts (i.e., hard data) under discussion in a particular document. First, determine if the factual information on a Web site can be corroborated elsewhere—through a reference to or citation of a clearly reliable source, for example. A Web site with data that cannot be confirmed should never be trusted, no matter how perfect it might seem for your purposes.

It's also important to understand the Web site's point of view or bias. How clear are its purposes? Does the language used on this site suggest a specific ideology or social or political agenda? Advocacy for a particular cause is not in itself a bad thing; when the slant of a site is deceptive or extreme, however, you should reject it as a legitimate research resource. If advertising appears on a Web page, try to determine the extent to which it may be influencing informational content: Is it clear where the boundary is between the advertising and information content? Does the data seem manipulated to serve the ads, or are the ads simply used to fund the site?

Sites that have academic or educational content are often non-profit sites and generally follow certain rules. Scholarship relies upon context and usually builds on precedent, so ask yourself these questions:

- Do you have the sense that the author is positioning himself or herself within an ongoing and serious discussion?
- Does the site demonstrate knowledge of related research—and does the author cite current and reliable sources?
- If footnotes, bibliographies, and hypertext links are used, do they add authority, credibility, or depth to the argument or only seem to do so?

• **What is the site's currency and coverage?**

Since information on the Web is so easily posted, it's especially important to make sure that the sources you consult are timely. Ask yourself these questions:

- Is the creation date of the document (or of its most recent revision) listed?
- Is the information up-to-date or are the resources outdated? Age is relative on the Web: certain documents are timeless—their value is determined completely by their place in the historical record, and a document that is three or four years old can still be "timely" in certain disciplines. In fields where knowledge develops rapidly (the sciences, for example) or data is expected to change (statistics, for example), currency is more critical. As always, if you have questions about whether a source is current enough for your purposes, ask your instructor or a librarian.

[<PREVIOUS](#) | [NEXT>](#)

Search

[Search Tips](#)

-
- [Introduction](#)
- [Why Use Sources?](#)
 - [What Are You Supposed To Do With Sources?](#)
 - [Writing "Original" Papers](#)

- [Locating Sources](#)
 - [Navigating the Harvard Libraries](#)
 - [Understanding Your Assignment](#)
- [Evaluating Sources](#)
 - [Questions to Ask About All Sources](#)
 - [Evaluating Journal Articles](#)
 - [Evaluating Web Sources](#)
 - [What's Wrong with Wikipedia?](#)
 - [Making Decisions Based on Your Discipline](#)
- [Avoiding Plagiarism](#)
 - [What Constitutes Plagiarism?](#)
 - [The Exception: Common Knowledge](#)
 - [Other Scenarios to Avoid](#)
 - [Why Does it Matter if You Plagiarize?](#)
 - [How to Avoid Plagiarism](#)
 - [Harvard Plagiarism Policy](#)
- [Integrating Sources](#)
 - [Sources and Your Assignment](#)
 - [A Source's Role in Your Paper](#)
 - [Choosing Relevant Parts of a Source](#)
 - [Summarizing, Paraphrasing, and Quoting](#)
 - [The Nuts & Bolts of Integrating](#)
- [Citing Sources](#)
 - [Citation Formats](#)
 - [Books](#)
 - [Scholarly Journals](#)
 - [Newspapers and Magazines](#)
 - [Other Text Sources](#)
 - [Non-Text Sources](#)