**Evaluating All Sources**

1. **What are the author's credentials?**

This information is readily available on the "about the author" page of most books, and generally can be found accompanying the author's name in journal articles. Finding information about the author of a Web site can be difficult and therefore you should be very careful about using Web sources if you can't locate any information about the author. Is the author qualified to write on the topic?

1. **What is the purpose of the source?**

Does the author cite other major works on or data about the topic, or is this a personal response to an issue or text? Does the author have some kind of financial stake in expressing a particular point of view? Does the author work for an organization with a known viewpoint on the issues discussed in the source? For example, a summary of an issue written by an author who works for an organization with a known political viewpoint on that issue might be quite different from a summary of that issue published elsewhere. Does the author’s point of view appear objective and impartial? What is the purpose of the information? Is the information fact, opinion or propaganda? Are there clear institutional or personal biases?

1. **What is the scope of the source?**

Does the source make an argument relevant to your topic? Does it respond to other arguments made by other scholars? Who is the intended audience? For more information about the scope and goals of a source, you can often consult an article's abstract—a short summary of the article's main ideas—or a book's introduction to get a sense of how it might be useful to you in your research.

1. **Who published the source?**

Is the publication a [peer-reviewed journal](http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k70847&pageid=icb.page346373#peer-review)? Is it published by an organization with a known viewpoint or financial stake in an issue? Does the language or tone seem unbiased?

1. **How current is the source?**

When was the information published? A premium is placed on the most current, and therefore up-to-date scholarship in the field is often preferred. So, for example, a literature review of a particular topic that was published ten years ago is much less relevant than one that was published this year. Time matters!

**Evaluating Web Sources**

*Although you should generally begin your electronic research by using e-resources available through the IWA databases, there may be times when you will want to use popular Web search engines like Google or better even, Google Scholar. Evaluate websites according to the following criteria:*

1. **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. 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.

1. **How accurate and objective is the site?**

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.

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?

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?

1. **What is the site's currency and coverage?**

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, currency is more critical.