

It Says So On the Internet

Learning to Tell Fact from Fiction on the World Wide Web

A Library Survival Sheet



The Internet is big. [Metamend](#) estimates that the web expands by about 10,000,000 pages a day. Those pages pour in from a wide variety of sources, the work of [universities](#) & [research institutions](#), [fanatics](#) & [crackpots](#) alike.

This range of authorship makes it particularly important to understand that the net has no quality control. The editors, fact-checkers, legal departments, proofreaders, and rewrite teams who stand behind much of the traditional media do not stand behind the net. Anyone can put up a web site and, as Fido said in the chat room, "[On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog.](#)"

You have to decide for yourself if information from a particular site is reliable—which is not an easy job when the topic is unfamiliar. Start with these leading questions:

Who made the site? There is a person or a group behind every single page. Can you tell who they are? Does the contact information include a postal address or phone number? Are their qualifications stated? Are they noted for a particular point of view?

Why did they make it? There is a purpose underlying every site; information, entertainment, sales, advertising, persuasion, and recruitment are among the most common. Does the author tell you why the site was created? Do you agree? Can you detect a hidden agenda?

What do the pages look like? Appearance counts. Have the authors used correct spelling and conventional grammar? Is the site organized and easy to navigate? Up to date? Readable? How's the ratio of information to fluff?

Where is it? Check out the neighborhood. Is there [.edu](#), [.gov](#), or [.mil](#) in the URL, marking it as university, government, or military? If it is commercial ([.com](#)) or organizational ([.org](#)), what do you know about that company or group? Is there a tilde (~) in the address, which usually points to a personal home page? Or a [.k12.us](#) indicating a public school?

How does it compare? Check out the competition. How does this site compare with more traditional sources of information on the topic? Do some fact-checking in an encyclopedia or specialized reference book. How does it stack up against the other web sites you found on the same topic?

Visit our *Question Authority* page at <http://www.hopkinton.k12.nh.us/groups/hhslibrary/watchout.html> to see examples of the kinds of sites that might trip you up,

And *keep your brain engaged* when you search the net for information that matters to you.

THE ALL-OR-NOTHING* CHECKLIST

- There is a real, credible organization or person behind this site; if there is bias, I am aware of it.
- The site looks good and its neighborhood is suitable; pages are well organized, up-to-date, and free from spelling mistakes.
- It was created to inform or educate, and I don't detect a hidden agenda.
- Several facts and opinions agree with what I found in books, magazines, or newspapers.

*If you can't check them all, you've probably got nothing.

For examples of questionable sites, visit our [del.icio.us bookmarks](#) & pick *Question Authority*.