

Helping Students Learn to Evaluate and Select Source Material from the Internet and the World Wide Web

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THE INCREASING AVAILABILITY of the Internet and World Wide Web to students has led to some interesting problems for professors who assign research papers and reports. On the one hand, there is the problem of citing electronic source material correctly. However, that problem has begun to diminish as style books such as those affiliated with the American Psychological Association and the Modern Language Association have been revised and updated.

A more challenging problem to some teachers is the nature and content of the electronic source material itself. Some of us are finding that students are resorting to citing materials of easy retrieval but of questionable value. Some students cite little more than material gleaned from electronic encyclopedias while others seem to lose their critical reasoning skills altogether as they are overwhelmed by the wealth of sources available in electronic form. Thus, a psychology professor might find that his or her student has cited Sally Know-it-all's Home Page as an authority on manic-depressive disorders while an education professor might find that his or her students have cited information gleaned from the web site for the Society for the Prevention of Bad Teaching. Such students seem to forget that there is no one governing the quality or the accuracy of the information available on-line. Just about anyone can create a home page, and our democratic right to freedom of speech is not limited to those who would write only the truth. Those who wish to distort, twist, misrepresent, and mislead are protected as well.

Obviously, the best judge as to which electronic sources students should use would be each student's professor. The best judge should be a scholar in the field. However, that answer is of little practical value to the students who are "surfing the Net" late in the evening or on Saturday or Sunday afternoon.

In response to increasing concerns of professors at East Georgia College, I have developed some general guidelines for the evaluation and selection of sources from the electronic media, and our library committee has agreed to adopt these for student use. You may find them useful, with or without adaptation, for your students as well.

A Guide to Evaluating and Selecting Source Material from the Internet and the World Wide Web

In selecting sources from the Internet, the user should understand that not all sources are of equal worth. As they should with any other source, student Internet users should consider the following:

- What is the reputation of the author? Does the author have credentials in the field? What are the author's title and professional affiliation? Do other experts in the field recognize the author as an authority? Does the author have other publications on the topic?
- What is the reputation of the publisher? Does the publisher have a particular bias? Is the publisher appealing to a specific group that may have a personal agenda (e.g., a tobacco company appealing to smokers who are against second-hand smoke ordinances)?
- How well researched is the presented information? Is the information based on research or unsupported generalizations and personal opinions? Does the source contain documentation and references? Is there a reliance on secondary source material over primary sources?
- What is the publication date? Is the information current and up-to-date?
- Is the source reliable? Is the information presented consistent with other sources?

In selecting source sites, the Internet user would be well advised to seek guidance from authorities in the field. However, the following additional guidelines are offered:

- Give preference to on-line journals and electronic databases that are affiliated with recognized authorities such as Colleges and Universities State and Federal Agencies, Institutes, and Foundations (for instance, the National Cancer Institute, National Center for Health Statistics) Nationally Recognized Organizations (for instance, the Modern Language Association, the American Psychological Association)

- Use full text articles from magazines, newspapers, and journals available from CD-ROMs and other portable databases.
- In general, avoid using electronic correspondence including e-mail and conversations from electronic discussion groups and bulletin boards. In some publication manuals (such as the one published by the American Psychological Association), these types of sources would be treated as personal communications and would not be considered as appropriate for inclusion in the list of references.
- Avoid home pages unless the author is specifically affiliated with a recognized authority such as a specific department within a college or university, a federal or state agency, or a nationally recognized organization.
- Avoid sites in which the authoritativeness of the information or the author cannot be determined.

There will, of course, be exceptions to these suggestions. For instance, a student may be able to interview a celebrated author or a scientist of national recognition through the use of e-mail. Certainly, such a source

would make a valuable contribution to a student's paper and should be encouraged. However, I believe the guidelines are realistic enough to meet the needs of most of students and to assist faculty as they work with their students in the classroom.

Sources Consulted

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Recruiting & Training Faculty for Distance Learning: When Conscription is Not an Option

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MANY OF YOU MIGHT REMEMBER watching movies of the sea, with savage pirates and the noble King's fleet battling in their fragile wooden ships by day and carousing side by side in seedy port town bars by night. Whatever their moral and political differences might have been, these sea faring men of yore had much in common. They shared a passion for the sea, and a fondness for a good drink poured amid the murmur and din of voices. Often, they shared a method of recruiting as well. Picture if you will a young man celebrating his pending marriage, unaware that he is about to be clubbed over the head by his new-found "friends." His fiancée, they know, will assume her intended simply got cold feet. He disappears without a trace. On a nearby street an old man with a limp, doddering and drunk after the night's festivities, is carried off by men intent

on setting sail and reaching a destination that simply must be reached. Shanghai! So common was conscription in that port city that its very name became synonymous with what might politely be termed involuntary recruiting. And yes, this scenario is possible for distance learning "recruitment" in the age of cyberspace and two-way, interactive audio/video travel. Old habits never die, especially when the rewards are so enticing, unless the Captain in charge is a well-read academic, perhaps even an English major, who has not stared into an administrative sea for so long he knows not and remembers not what happened to Narcissus. At Darton College we are fortunate enough to have a Vice President for Academic Affairs who had the vision to implement a distance learning program that, while supported by technology, was driven by instruction, and a President