

## Valid Websites

Think of some websites you often use when you write reports on an assigned subject. You might use sites like:

- The Library of Congress
- Other primary sources
- Wikipedia

How do you know if you can trust the information you find on the sites you named? Sometimes people will automatically trust a site because of the following reasons:

- Everyone uses it
- It sounds right
- My teachers/parents told me to use it
- I got there from a link on another site

It can be hard to tell when to trust the information you find on a website. In this lesson, you are going to learn some ways to evaluate whether a specific website is a trustworthy source of information.

## Can Anyone Be an Author?

**EVALUATE:** To carefully examine something to figure out its value

**TRUSTWORTHY:** Accurate and dependable

**CRITERIA:** Standards on which you base a judgment or decision

**COMMUNITY (on the Web):** Group of people who are connected through a website, often working on a common project

**SITE MAP:** A list of the webpages on a website

The Web has made it easy for anyone to become an “author” and “publish” information for other people to read. What kinds of people would you expect to write a book about endangered species in Australia? Here are some types of people you might expect to write such a book:

- Wildlife biologist
- Zoologist
- Expert on Australian animals
- Someone who has spent time in Australia studying wildlife
- Aboriginal people who know about the local wildlife

What kinds of people might write an article about a new health care law just passed by

Congress? Here are some people you might expect to write an article like that:

- Health care experts
- Doctors
- Political scientists
- Reporters who cover health care
- Reporters in Washington who write about Congress

What do you think might happen if YOU wrote a book about endangered species in Australia? Would a book publisher be likely to publish it? What if YOU wrote an article about a new health care law? Do they think a major newspaper would print the article? BUT - what if you wanted to post the same article on the Web? Could you do it?

Publishing printed material (newspapers, magazines, books) is different from publishing on the Web.

**The Bad News:** Although many websites are written by people with expertise on a particular topic, this isn't always the case throughout the Web. Sometimes people who create or post on blogs do not have a background in the subject matter, and there is no editor to hold them to a high standard. Their "facts" may not be true. They often don't fix errors when some are found. They may pretend that their opinions are facts. They may create websites full of information that is blatantly untrue, but they design the website to look good and people may be fooled into thinking it is valid. They may even choose to include unkind or harmful statements.

**The Good News:** The standards for publication on the Web are getting higher every day. While there are generally fewer rules about what can and can't be published on the Web, there are a growing number of sites that have high standards for publishing information. And, though it is very important to use a critical eye when looking at websites, you also shouldn't assume that online information is incorrect or of lesser quality than information in books or newspapers. Both can be good, but you need to be smart about what you are looking for.

Think of an article you might want to write for a school magazine or a website for kids. Are you qualified to be author of that article? Why or why not? To be a reliable author, you don't need to have advanced degrees or important jobs. You just need to know a lot about their subject, have trustworthy sources of information on your subject, and check your facts carefully.

### **Test Before You Trust**

How do you know whether you can trust the information you find on a website?

Some ways you might know:

- The author is an expert and received awards
- The site is run by a respected organization or type of website (e.g., .gov, .edu)

- It comes from a well-known newspaper
- I got there from a link on another site that I trust

After you have read this lesson read and listen to ***Test Before You Trust guiding questions***. These are questions you need to keep in mind as you look at websites.

### **Spotting Websites You Just Can't Trust**

As we know, you can't automatically trust everything that you find online—especially when you're studying a topic that can get people all riled up! In today's world, people are using the internet to share their opinions and to try to persuade readers to think a certain way.

As a researcher, though, it is your job to find facts and to avoid being fooled by people who aren't telling you the whole truth. This activity will help you to spot websites that aren't trustworthy by looking at a hoax website: ***Free Forever! Dog Island***.

Click the link in the lesson to see the website ***Free Forever! Dog Island***

### **Hoax Spotting Strategies:**

#### ***Common Sense Matters***

One of the best defenses against falling for half-truths told online is your own common sense! If something just doesn't sound right on the website that you are exploring, you should automatically be suspicious!

The first thing that should catch your attention on the ***Dog Island*** website is the very idea of this! Have you ever heard of whole islands given over to let pets run wild with no people? Right—and your common sense should automatically make you doubt the rest of the information shared on this page.

#### ***Look for Links***

The sad fact of the digital age is that anyone can write anything at anytime online, whether it is true or not! This means that legitimate writers link to any source that they reference in their work.

Knowing that they've got to build the confidence of readers, online content creators will always supply you with the sources for their information—and online readers always need to explore multiple sources before deciding what is worth believing.

Look for links in the ***Dog Island*** website (not the ad links). Has the author included any? Where would you expect to see more links added if this were a reliable website? Are there any claims made in the text that responsible writers would prove were true by including links to evidence?

## Links don't automatically equal credibility

While links are a good sign that the author of a website might be telling the truth, the presence of links doesn't automatically mean that a site can be trusted. Links—just like anything online—can be faked, too! Good website authors will always include links to a diverse range of websites. Anytime that EVERY link in an online article takes you to the same site, the chances are good that you shouldn't trust the information being shared. On the ***Dog Island*** website, some of the Press links are on Word documents, and their links take you to the main websites of news organizations, but NOT to any specific article.

## Look at the fine print

Let's face it: Few of us ever really read the fine print on any website. In fact, we rarely even notice the small links titled ***disclaimers, terms of service, frequently asked questions*** (FAQs) or ***contact us*** buried in the ***header*** or the ***footer*** of most sites. And that's a recipe for disaster considering that this often hidden content is usually the only place where hoaxsters bother to tell the truth. Anyone looking to protect themselves from being tricked online just HAS to take the time to poke through the fine print.

Click the ***disclaimer link*** found at the bottom of the main page of the ***Dog Island*** website. Look at some of the comical statements included on this page that proves that ***Dog Island*** is nothing but a funny prank that this author is pulling on readers.

## Look out for Loaded Words

Whenever you are exploring websites about controversial topics, you are bound to come across words and phrases that are packed with emotion. Getting involved is ***urgent*** and sitting on the sidelines is ***a crime***. ***Tragedies*** happen every day, and ***we can't wait a minute longer*** to act. ***Devastation*** is possible. ***Carelessness*** is a cause. While these kinds of ***emotionally loaded words and phrases*** don't automatically mean that the author is lying, they are a sign of ***bias***. Authors who use ***loaded words and phrases*** have a strong opinion that they just can't hide— and that means they may willingly fail to tell readers how others feel about the issue. When you see ***loaded words and phrases***, it is important to do a bit more digging so that you learn “the whole truth” about an issue.

## Wrap Up

Why should you be careful to evaluate websites before using their information in research projects? Because anyone can publish material of any quality on the Web.

Using the “Test Before You Trust” questions to evaluate sites might make you a better researcher, because it can keep you from making mistakes. If your sources are reliable, then your research projects and even your posts on blogs or other sites won’t contain inaccurate information.



DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP IN A CONNECTED CULTURE

©2011 [www.commonsense.org](http://www.commonsense.org) [Terms of Use](#)

---