

EVALUATING ONLINE RESOURCES

THE BIG PICTURE

- The internet makes it easy to find information about almost any topic. Search engines, websites, social media platforms, online video platforms, and artificial intelligence (AI) tools can provide answers within seconds.
- The internet also contains significant amounts of inaccurate, misleading, outdated, and intentionally false information.
- Knowing how to evaluate the quality and credibility of online resources helps people make informed decisions, share reliable information, and reduce the spread of misinformation, which is crucial when searching for information that may affect an individual's well-being.

A quick internet search can provide access to a wide variety of information and, in many cases, a summary generated by an AI system. Unfortunately, the speed and convenience of online research come at a cost. Some online information is missing important details and/or is outdated, incorrect, or deliberately false.

Online information may be inaccurate for a variety of reasons. Sometimes content creators make honest mistakes. AI systems are designed to provide answers to questions, so they sometimes “hallucinate” and make up information when they do not find a good answer. In other cases, individuals or organizations deliberately publish false or misleading information to gain attention, promote a product or service, support a particular viewpoint, influence opinions, or generate revenue.

Regardless of the reason, it is important to avoid being misled by inaccurate information and to

avoid sharing it with others. Because inaccurate information can affect decisions and recommendations, it is important to use a structured approach when evaluating online resources.

WATCH FOR WARNING SIGNS

Before looking more closely at a source, be alert for warning signs that information may be misleading. Be cautious of content that creates strong emotions such as fear, anger, outrage, or excitement; urges immediate action such as sharing content, donating money, purchasing a product, or providing personal information; makes extraordinary claims without strong evidence; seems too good to be true; or presents events or people in ways that appear exaggerated or inconsistent with how they normally behave. When information seems suspicious, take time to verify it before relying on it or sharing it with others.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

Author

Start by identifying who wrote the information. Is the author's name listed? Does the author have education, training, professional credentials, or experience related to the topic? It is also important to determine whether the author is writing independently or on behalf of an organization. Understanding who the author is, what expertise they bring, and whom they represent can help you assess the reliability of the information. Authors with relevant qualifications are generally more likely to provide accurate and informed content.

Source or Publisher

Next, consider where the information was published. Is the website, organization, or media outlet familiar and reputable? Trusted publishers typically have editorial standards, review processes, and clear contact information.

Website addresses can sometimes provide clues about the source:

- .gov websites are typically operated by government agencies,
- .edu websites are associated with educational institutions,
- .org websites are often operated by nonprofit organizations, and
- .com websites are generally commercial organizations or businesses.

A website's domain alone does not guarantee accuracy, but understanding who published the information can help you evaluate its credibility.

Currency of the Information

Information can become outdated, especially in areas such as healthcare, treatment, technology, public policy, and science. Check when the information was published or last updated. Many articles on web pages do not provide that information, which should be considered a red flag. If there is no date at the top of the page, scroll to the end of the page to look for a date. Sometimes the date can be found in the page's URL. If there is a date, ask yourself, is the information recent? Does it reflect current recommendations and best practices? Have important developments occurred since it was published? When researching health-related topics, always try to use the most current information available.

Purpose

Understanding why information was created can help you determine how much trust to place in it. Ask yourself: Was the content created to inform or educate? Is it trying to persuade readers to adopt a particular viewpoint? Is it promoting a product, service, or organization? Is it intended primarily for entertainment?

Content designed to persuade or sell something is not necessarily inaccurate, but it may present information selectively. Recognizing the purpose can help you identify potential limitations.

Point of View

Every author has experiences, beliefs, and perspectives that may influence how information is presented. When evaluating online content, consider whether the information appears fair and balanced. Ask yourself: Does the author acknowledge different viewpoints? Are both benefits and limitations discussed? Is the language factual and objective or emotional and persuasive? Bias does not automatically mean that information is false. However, understanding an author's perspective can help you evaluate information more critically and identify information that may be incomplete or one-sided.

Sources and Citations

Reliable information should be supported by evidence. Look for citations, references, links, or other documentation that allow readers to verify claims. Consider the following questions: Does the author explain where the information came from? Are statistics, studies, or factual claims supported by references? Can the information be confirmed by other trusted sources? Be cautious when an article makes significant claims without providing evidence or relies heavily on anonymous sources.

DISTINGUISHING FACT FROM OPINION

Not everything online is intended to present factual information. Some content reflects personal opinions, beliefs, or experiences. Personal stories can provide valuable insights and may help people understand an issue from another perspective. However, an individual's experience does not necessarily apply to everyone. Information based solely on personal experiences should be verified using additional reliable sources. Understanding the difference between facts, opinions, and personal experiences can help you make better-informed decisions.

HEALTH MISINFORMATION AND ONLINE SCAMS

Navigators often assist vulnerable individuals seeking help online. Unfortunately, health, treatment, recovery, or overdose prevention topics are common targets of misinformation. Health misinformation may include unproven treatments, exaggerated

health claims, “miracle cures,” and advice that is not supported by scientific evidence.

Following inaccurate health information can lead people to make poor decisions or delay receiving appropriate care. Online scams are another concern. Some websites, advertisements, emails, or social media posts may attempt to collect personal information, obtain passwords or financial information, sell fraudulent products, solicit donations for fake causes, or promote services that do not actually exist.

If a website pressures you to act immediately, creates a sense of urgency, requests sensitive information, or promises unrealistic results, proceed with caution. When evaluating health, treatment, or recovery information, prioritize trusted sources such as government agencies, healthcare organizations, universities, and established professional organizations.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE UNSURE

Sometimes a source may seem trustworthy, but questions remain. When that happens, do not rely on the information until it has been verified. If an offer seems too good to be true or creates a sense of urgency, take time to verify the organization and information through trusted sources before responding. If you are uncertain about information related to health, treatment, recovery, safety, or community resources, compare it with information from other trusted sources, consult a supervisor or experienced colleague, contact a healthcare professional or subject matter expert, or reach out directly to the organization providing the information. Taking a few extra minutes to verify information can prevent misunderstandings and help ensure that others receive accurate guidance.

QUICK CREDIBILITY CHECK

Before sharing online information, ask:

- ✓ Who wrote it?
- ✓ What organization published it?
- ✓ When was it published or updated?
- ✓ Why was it created?
- ✓ Does it appear balanced and objective?
- ✓ Are sources or citations provided?
- ✓ Can the information be confirmed elsewhere?
- ✓ Is it trying to make me fearful, angry, or act immediately?

For additional guidance on evaluating online information, visit:

- <https://library.georgetown.edu/tutorials/research-guides/evaluating-internet-content>
- https://libguides.wvu.edu/evaluating_sources/fact_checking
- https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/conducting_research/evaluating_sources_of_information/evaluating_digital_sources.html



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