



**MEDIA  
AWARENESS  
NETWORK**

www.media-awareness.ca

**Level:** Grades 10-12

#### **About the Author**

This exercise is based on an instructional web site created by J. Alexander and M. Tate, Wolfram Memorial Library, Widener University, July 1996

## **Lesson Plan**

### **Hoax? Scholarly Research? Personal Opinion? You Decide!**

#### **Overview**

This lesson is designed to help students determine the validity of information that is presented to them on the Internet. After reviewing a series of evaluation techniques for online resources, students form groups to assess selected Web sites based on accuracy and authority, advocacy and objectivity, and currency and coverage.

#### **\*\*Note to Teachers:**

*Hoax? Scholarly Research? Personal Opinion? You Decide!* is an online exercise designed to help students determine the validity of information that is presented to them on the Internet. Teachers should check the links that are provided for the activities to ensure they are functioning correctly.

Although we have endeavoured to link only to sites suitable for secondary students, there is always the possibility of encountering potentially offensive materials on, or through, some sites.

#### **Preparation and Materials**

Photocopy the following handouts:

- *The Web as a Research Tool: Evaluation Techniques*
- Group One Activity: *Authority and Accuracy*
- Group Two Activity: *Advocacy and Objectivity*
- Group Three Activity: *Currency and Coverage*

#### **The Lesson**

Distribute *The Web as a Research Tool: Evaluation Techniques* to students and review and discuss the main points.

#### **Beginning the Exercise**

Before starting the exercise "Hoax? Scholarly Research? Personal Opinion? *You Decide!*", divide your class into three groups. Each group will be given a specific topic that they will be evaluating on the sites they visit. The main question that students must decide is:

***Would you use this Web site for a research paper? Why or why not?***

When the groups have been designated, distribute the following assignment sheets:

- Group One: *Authority and Accuracy*
- Group Two: *Advocacy and Objectivity*
- Group Three: *Currency and Coverage*

Give students some time to review the exercise and discuss their exercise questions. Each group will then be given ten minutes to examine two Web sites from their assignment sheets. After ten minutes, the groups will report their findings to the class.

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Additional information on evaluating Web resources can be found in the authors' book *Web Wisdom: How to Evaluate and Create Information Quality on the Web*, published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999.

## The Web as a Research Tool: Evaluation Techniques

By Jan Alexander and Marsha Tate

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### Topics Covered

- Need for Evaluation of Web Sources
- Review of the Five Traditional Print Evaluation Criteria
- Adapting the Five Traditional Print Evaluation Criteria to Web Sources
- Additional Challenges Presented by Web Sources and How to Cope with Them
- Applying Evaluation Techniques to Specific Types of Web Resources
- Conclusion

### Need for Evaluation of Web Sources

Web usage for academic research is increasing rapidly. Because the quality of sources on the Internet vary tremendously, techniques are needed to evaluate Web resources. Some traditional print techniques for evaluation are still appropriate, but different techniques are also needed to address this new medium.

### Review of the Five Traditional Print Evaluation Criteria

Traditionally, five print evaluation criteria have been used to verify information:

**Criterion 1: Accuracy** How reliable and free from error is the information?

Are there editors and fact checkers?

**Criterion 2: Authority** What are the author's qualifications for writing on this subject?

How reputable is the publisher?

**Criterion 3: Objectivity** Is the information presented with a minimum of bias?

To what extent is the information trying to sway the opinion of the audience?

**Criterion 4: Currency** Is the content of the work up-to-date?

Is the publication date clearly labeled?

**Criterion 5: Coverage** What topics are included in the work?

Are the topics included explored in depth?

Adapting Five Traditional Print Evaluation Criteria to Web Resources

These five traditional print evaluation criteria can be adapted to suit Web resources.

**Criterion 1: Accuracy of Web Resources Almost anyone can publish on the Web**

- Many Web resources not verified by editors and/or fact checkers
- Web Standards to ensure accuracy yet to be fully developed

**Criterion 2: Authority of Web Resources**

- Often difficult to determine authorship of Web Sources
- If author's name is listed, his/her qualifications frequently absent
- Publisher responsibility often not indicated

**Criterion 3: Objectivity of Web Resources**

- Goals/aims of persons or groups presenting material often not clearly stated
- Web often functions as a "virtual soapbox"

**Criterion 4: Currency of Web Resources**

- Dates not always included on Web pages
- If included, a date may have various meanings:
  1. Date information first written
  2. Date information placed on Web
  3. Date information last revised

**Criterion 5: Coverage of Web Resources**

- Web coverage may differ from print coverage
- Often hard to determine extent of Web coverage

**Additional Challenges Presented by Web Resources and How To Cope with Them**

**Marketing-Oriented Web Pages**

**Challenge**

- In print sources, usually clear distinction between advertising and information
- On the Web, the distinction between advertising and information can easily become blurred

**Coping Strategy**

- Determine if advertising and informational content are being supplied by the same person or organization;
- If so, advertising likely to bias informational content

## **"Infommercial" Web Pages**

### **Challenge**

- Blending of entertainment, information, and advertising on Web Pages
- Coping Strategy
- Caveat Emptor: View these Web pages with the same critical eye you would an infommercial

## **Use of Hypertext Links**

### **Challenge**

- Quality of Web pages linked to original Web page may vary
- Coping Strategy
- Evaluate each Web page independently

## **Software Requirements May Limit Access to Web Information**

### **Challenge**

- Full access may require additional software
  - Browsers may alter the appearance of Web Pages
- Coping Strategy
- Be aware that software may limit how much information you obtain and how the information appears on your screen

## **Web Pages Out of Context**

### **Challenge**

- Search Engines can retrieve Web Pages out of context
  - May or may not be a way of determining source of information
- Coping Strategy
- Always try to return to the "home page" to determine source of information
- Instability of Web Pages

### **Challenge**

- Web pages may move or disappear without notice
- Coping Strategy
- Try to determine the stability of your source
  - Document source to the fullest extent possible

## **Susceptibility of Web Pages to Alteration**

### **Challenge**

- Web pages are susceptible to both accidental and deliberate alteration
- Coping strategy
- Attempt to verify information using other sources

## Applying Evaluation Techniques to Specific Types of Web Resources

### Step 1: Identify the Type of Web Page

- ▶ Entertainment
- ▶ Business/Marketing
- ▶ Reference/Information
- ▶ News
- ▶ Advocacy
- ▶ Personal Page

### Step 2: Use the Appropriate Checklist

### Step 3: Based on the Checklist Criteria, Determine the Relative Quality of the Web Page

- ▶ The more “yes” answers to questions indicates a higher quality Web page

### Conclusion: Remember!

- ▶ ***The Web is only one source of information***
  - It can be very useful for researching certain topics
  - It can be almost useless for other topics
  - To research a topic thoroughly, use a variety of sources, both Web and non-Web
  
- ▶ ***Web evaluation techniques are just beginning to be developed***
  
- ▶ ***Technology is outpacing ability to create standards and guidelines***
  
- ▶ ***Establishing evaluation procedures will be an ongoing evolutionary process***

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## Authority and Accuracy

***How critical an observer are you? Learn how to evaluate information sources by doing the following exercise. You only have ten minutes, so be sure to stay on task!***

Pick any two sites from the list below. What evidence can you find to determine the basis for claims made on these pages? How could you tell whether or not the information provided is accurate?

Feline Reactions to Bearded Men (<http://www.improb.com/airchives/cat.html>)

Virtual Medical Clinic (<http://www.virtualmedicalclinic.com/>)

OncoLink (<http://oncolink.upenn.edu/>)

Tobacco Control Archives (<http://www.library.ucsf.edu/tobacco/index.html>)

Questions to consider when reviewing web pages for authority and accuracy.

1. Can you determine who put this page together?
2. What is the background, credentials, or authority of the author of this web page?
3. How would you verify the information presented on this web page?

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## Classroom Activity

# Advocacy and Objectivity

***How critical an observer are you? Learn how to evaluate information sources by doing the following exercise. You only have ten minutes, so be sure to stay on task!***

Pick any two sites from the list below. What evidence can you find to determine whether or not these sites are favouring a particular point of view or are taking an objective approach?

Consumer Reports Online (<http://www.consumerreports.com/>)

Families Against Internet Censorship (<http://www.netfamilies.org/>)

EarthSave International (<http://www.earthsave.org/>)

Human Cloning (<http://www.humancloning.org/>)

Questions to consider when viewing these web pages for advocacy and objectivity.

1. Do the author(s) present the information as fact or opinion or conjecture?
2. Does this page present more than one viewpoint or opinion?
3. Can you determine who or what group sponsors this web page? Do they hold a particular view or opinion?

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## Currency and Coverage

***How critical an observer are you? Learn how to evaluate information sources by doing the following exercise. You only have ten minutes, so be sure to stay on task!***

Pick any two sites from the list below. What evidence can you find to determine how up to date these pages are and whether or not they cover their topics as completely as they claim?

- *Drudge Report* (<http://www.drudgereport.com/>)
- *CNN* (<http://www.cnn.com>)
- *Auto-by-Tel* (<http://www.autobytel.com/>)

Questions to consider when reviewing web pages for currency and coverage.

1. What does "up to date" or "current" mean for this site? (Hint: What is the latest date you can find on this site?)
2. Does the site really provide information on all the aspects or areas it claims to cover?
3. Is the information provided uniformly complete for all the aspects and areas the site claims to cover?

*Bonus question:* Where could you find more up to date or complete information on your topic?

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