

Trask's Ten Tips for Using the World Wide Web in Research

1. **Be skeptical.** Anyone can post material on The Web. That is both its beauty and its danger. Skepticism is the key to all these tips. Websites come with many email accounts, these days, so the variety is nearly infinite. (NOTE on Wikipedia: Use it carefully; cross check with other sources.)
2. **Look for verification.** Can you verify the information you got from your web source by some other source? Does it fit with or contradict everything else you've seen on the subject?
3. **Consider the source.** Who is the author of the information? Who maintains the site? Why do they do it? A professor providing course materials may be more reliable than a private person with an agenda.
4. **Look for documentation.** Does the author of the information on the website provide sources? Is there a bibliography? Are there notes?
5. **Check the documentation where possible.** Spot check the sources cited by the author. Do they check out? Are they used accurately and fairly?
6. **In general, check websites against books and articles.** It is much more difficult to publish a book or an article in a journal than it is to place material on The Web. Although there are privately published books, they are not usually found in college libraries. Most books in a college library have been bought at the request of a faculty member or after a check by a librarian. Most journals subscribed to by libraries are subject to editorial and peer review. There are no such controls on most websites. On the other hand, websites can be updated much more rapidly than can either books or journals, so the information may be more current.
7. **Is what you're looking at an original document?** One of the most exciting features of The Web is the availability of original documents that have been scanned or typed in and posted in electronic form. As with any other publishing medium, however, unless the provider of documents is extremely careful, mistakes will be introduced in the electronic form of the document.
8. **Personal anecdotes versus hard research.** Some personal anecdotes are very compelling. However, without verification or replication, they are not to be taken with, say, the importance of hard research that is based on many such sources. A personal account of an event should be considered, but it should not by itself be taken as refutation of broader based studies.
9. **Avoid propaganda sites.** Why does this site exist? Some sites on the Internet exist primarily to promote a particular point of view, to spread a religion, to support a political party, or to grind a private axe. These sites are usually easy to spot because they announce themselves in many ways, but a few of them are more sophisticated, making it harder to see that they have a stake in what they're promoting. That doesn't mean that they are entirely useless, but it does mean that they are not to be relied upon as sources without other verification.
10. **Document the site using MLA style** (or the appropriate style for your subject area) documentation. If you properly document the site, readers will be able to check it easily. Follow a current handbook or style sheet (perhaps the MLA Style Citations for Electronic Sources). Make sure that you include the date that you visited the site. Most sites change on a regular basis, and many of them include the date of the most recent change. Also, sites come and go. For example, if the Internet Service Provider is not paid on time, it may delete a site without notice. The Web is a volatile, rich, dangerous, rewarding, wonderful resource. Use it with caution.

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