THE FIVE W’S OF WEBSITE EVALUATION

WHO
Who wrote the pages and are they an expert?
Is a biography of the author included?
How can I find out more about the author?

WHAT
What does the author say is the purpose of the site?
What else might the author have in mind for the site?
What makes the site easy to use?
What information is included and does this information differ from other sites?

WHEN
When was the site created?
When was the site last updated?

WHERE
Where does the information come from?
Where can I look to find out more about the sponsor of the site?

WHY
Why is this information useful for my purpose?
Why should I use this information?
Why is this page better than another?
HOW DO I FIND ONLINE RESOURCES THAT ARE RELIABLE AND TRUSTWORTHY?

Websites, online databases, and other electronic resources are especially helpful when researching evolving subject areas, like the sciences, because new information is constantly emerging. Finding useful websites with accurate and reliable information isn’t easy; here are some hints to help you in your search for authoritative sources:

**What is the link suffix?** You can generally trust .edu (education), and .gov (government) sites, because the qualifications for those addresses are specific in terms of acceptable standards. Organization sites, .org, are usually reliable, but are less regulated. That said, there are always exceptions, so use your best judgment, and ALWAYS cross-reference with multiple sources!

**Author:** When consulting a book to research a subject, you would want to know the author and his credentials to know the source is authoritative; the same holds true for a website. Is there an “About” section? Most reputable sites and organizations will tell you who they are, why the site exists, and any relevant contributors’ credentials. Also note if contact or email links are available which would allow you to ask the author or sponsoring organization for more information. If you cannot verify the author of a website, either personal or corporate, be wary.

**Text:** Is the argument presented logically, evenly, and without bias?

**Editorial Policy:** The whole website is important, not just the page or section you consult. Is there a mission or purpose statement, or evidence of a consultant review or editorial board? Has the website been read and reviewed by experts (a.k.a. “Peer Review”)?

**Publisher or Sponsoring Organization:** This information must now be included in all MLA citations for online sources. Like the name of the author, the publisher or sponsoring organization is necessary for print publications, and should be available for reputable online sources, too. This information should be clearly stated, easy to locate, and preferably with an accompanying link to more information about the organization. The link suffix will help you determine what kind of organization it is (e.g. “.com” = commercial, “.edu” = educational, etc.).

**Accuracy and Verifiability:** Is there a *Works Cited* or *References* section? You should be able to verify all information presented by tracing the authors’ sources. Are these sources up-to-date?

**Currency:** Make sure the website you are consulting is current by checking the publication date. Ideally, the site will have dates for revisions and updates—not just initial publication or copyright.