**2-27-22 Teaching Students to Evaluate Websites**

**MEDIA LITERACY**

Teaching Students to Evaluate Websites

A few pointers on how to guide middle and high school students to determine whether a website offers accurate information.

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Perceptive adults and savvy students know that saying something doesn’t make it a fact, and neither does publishing information on the internet. But how to know which websites are sharing accurate information? As middle and high school students conduct research or access the internet on their own time, they need to be able to determine the accuracy of what they’re reading by reviewing websites with a critical eye.

**IT’S EASY TO DEVELOP A WEBSITE**

There are many platforms (like GoDaddy and Wix) that allow individuals to easily create professional-quality websites without having to learn HTML coding. That means that anyone with internet access can publish virtually anything on the internet, and with current estimates of [1.145 trillion MB of data](https://techjury.net/blog/how-much-data-is-created-every-day/#gref) being created each day, it’s unwise to assume that everything available on the internet is accurate and truthful. Middle and high school students should learn to review websites for their content, source, and purpose. By becoming educated consumers of information, students will gain a better understanding of what they’re reading and the context.

Becoming a website sleuth is actually quite easy when students know what to look for. Middle and high school students can review three facets of any site to determine the validity and objectivity of what they’re reading or viewing: 1. appearance versus content; 2. source of information; and 3. the website’s purpose.

**SEPARATING APPEARANCE FROM CONTENT**

A site can look polished and professional yet [include inaccurate content](https://zapatopi.net/treeoctopus/)—or, conversely, it can look imperfect yet [disseminate factual information](https://revealize.com/8-ugly-websites-and-how-to-fix-them). It’s therefore helpful for students to intellectually separate a website’s look from the information the site is sharing.

* Is the website easy to navigate? Students want to understand how to steer through pages and links quickly to find information without any confusion. Contemporary websites should load fast and lead visitors to material with the smallest number of clicks possible. That includes an efficient way to return to the home page, too.
* Are there a lot of ads or pop-ups on the site? Quality websites strive to reduce distractions and to maintain focus on the information they provide. Numerous advertisements, especially those that occupy significant visual space and continuously reload, can negatively impact a learner’s focus and comprehension. When there are ads on webpages, students can assess whether the advertised products make sense for the particular sites. Here’s an [example of a satirical site with pop-ups](http://www.thedogisland.com/facilities.html) and advertisements.
* Does the website include many spelling, syntax, or grammatical errors? Reputable internet publishers strive to post error-free, easy-to-understand information. Error-filled writing can be difficult to read and dilute the context. Note: Be flexible with nonnative English speakers who post in English.
* Do graphics serve a purpose? Images should have specific purposes, such as extending understanding or clarifying information. Graphics should make sense and [not confuse or merely decorate the space](https://www.theworldsworstwebsiteever.com/) in a random manner.

**REVIEWING THE SOURCE OF INFORMATION**

It’s important to find out where the information on the website originated by looking at the bottom of its home page or scanning “About Us” or “FAQ.” If an organization authors a site, students should conduct a short review to find out more about the group.

* Website domains provide information. Use the URL (uniform resource locator) to learn about the site’s source. Endings such as .gov or .edu are attributed to government or educational institutions, which can add legitimacy to sites.
* Is the author qualified to provide this information? Once students determine a website’s publisher, they can dig deeper to learn more about the person or organization. Find out [if and how the website source is qualified to provide the information](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cWZlHH_BRYM) by conducting a brief review of the author. With the understanding that website publication is inexpensive and easy, readers should be aware of a website author’s experience and education in the targeted field.
* Check a few sources. Trustworthy sites typically provide links to other reputable sources, so it’s wise to review several links to validate the information. If no sources are listed, check for other websites that use the current one as a reference.

**CHECKING FOR THE PURPOSE OF THE SITE**

Is the site sharing facts, or is it interpreting them for its readers? An individual conducting research might begin with a website that shares basic information, while registered voters making decisions about candidates might prefer websites that have already sifted through data and share opinions. A site’s purpose will be interconnected with its source.

To determine a site’s purpose:

* Review the home page and a few others. The website or organization might be trying to sell a product or even promote a particular point of view. A biased site might include product or organization advertisements that support its ideals, or there could be opinionated blogging and one-sided articles. Biased sites try to persuade, and they might include video, still images, music, partial interpretation of data, and an appeal to emotions, rather than sharing impartial information. Consider [Foundation for a Smoke-Free World](https://www.smokefreeworld.org/) and the [World Health Organization’s statement](https://www.who.int/news/item/28-09-2017-who-statement-on-philip-morris-funded-foundation-for-a-smoke-free-world)—sites published by two very different organizations.
* Confirm the context of quotes and information. Research the origins of a few website quotes or images to verify the context of the originals, and to help determine if the site is legitimate. It takes only a click to insert a quote, so review the wording and context of the original phrase to glean the original meaning. If the site doesn’t include accurate information from other sources, the purpose likely is to persuade readers.

Promotional or unbiased websites shouldn’t be universally viewed as bad or faulty. In fact, there’s a lot to learn from understanding others’ points of view. Sometimes biased websites are published to present [farcical material for entertainment](https://www.theonion.com/), which can be particularly challenging for students to identify.

Here are a few sites you can use to teach students how to review websites: [Aluminum Foil Deflector Beanie](https://zapatopi.net/afdb/), [Dihydrogen Monoxide Research](http://www.dhmo.org/), [Petrol Direct](http://www.petroldirect.com/), [Ninja Burger](https://www.ninjaburger.com/index.shtml), [The Republic of Cascadia](https://zapatopi.net/cascadia/).

Once students determine that a website is one they want to access, they should find several others to use for cross-checking information. Confirm by checking various websites, periodicals, and even books: One source is not enough. With the continuous deluge of websites, it’s more important than ever that we teach middle and high school students to critically review the sources of their information.