



Assessing Internet Source Reliability

In order to evaluate an online source, we need to know the answers to the five “W” questions:

Who wrote it?

Is **what** they wrote reasonable?

When was it written?

Where is it published?

Why was it written at all?

While a reliable source might not pass every single “W” test, the more it passes, the more likely the source is to be worthy of your trust.

Who? If the person writing the source is knowledgeable, the information is more likely to be correct.

- Does the source provide the (real, not pseudonymous) name of the author? If not, does it provide contact information for the organizational author?
- If there is a single author, does that person’s job, experience, or education make them qualified to talk about *this* topic? (Trust a lawyer to give you advice on your landlord/tenant dispute but not on how to best houstrain your dog). If this isn’t immediately apparent, can you find a link to an author bio or google the person’s name to uncover it?

What? If the information is in general agreement with other sources on the topic, it is more likely to be correct.

- If you compare the information in this source with other sources on the topic, particularly sources that you know are reliable, how well does it fit in? If the information or tone is radically different, it may not be trustworthy, especially if the credentials of its author are also questionable.
- Be suspicious of sources that only present one side of an argument or one way of approaching data.

When? If the information is recent, it is more likely to be correct.

- When was the source published? Has been updated since it was first published? (if there’s no date at the top, try scrolling down to the bottom of the page to see if there’s a copyright of “last updated” date.)
- If it quotes sources, when were they published?
- If there’s no other way to determine when the site was published, try following the links. Broken links often indicate a page that has not been kept up to date.

Where? Information housed on a reliable site is more likely to be correct.

- Is there a link to a homepage? If so, consider the home page by the other criteria in this list.
- If there isn't a link to the homepage, try to get to one by returning to the top level domain. (To do this, delete everything in your address bar after the first "/"—so, <http://www.ou.edu/content/writingcenter.html> becomes <http://www.ou.edu>)
- Who owns the site? A .gov (government) site will have limits to the type of information it can provide. A school site (.edu) may have a student authors (even children!) or authors who are professors. A commercial or organization's site may be trying to sell you something or to persuade you to their point of view.
- Look for an "about us" link (often located at the bottom of the page or on the main page for a website) to help you determine who the hosts are.

Why? A source that seeks to inform rather than persuade is more likely to be reliable.

- Is the purpose of the source to persuade you to buy something or to give money to someone? If so, you might imagine that they will present a very limited point of view on the topic at hand, one that likely leaves out the other side of the argument.
- Or, is the purpose of the source to inform you about different viewpoints on a subject or to teach you about a topic? A site that presents more than one approach to an idea is more likely to be trustworthy.