

# Northeast Lakeview College LRC

## Resource Guide - Evaluating Websites

[www.alamo.edu/nlc/library](http://www.alamo.edu/nlc/library)

### *What is a website?*

In this guide, the term “website” is used to indicate any free information source found on the World Wide Web. Websites are often located via search engines such as Google, Yahoo, etc. The term “website” is NOT used to refer to library resources, such as books and e-books found in the [library catalog](#), journal articles found in [library databases](#), etc., even though many of these resources are accessed via the Internet.

### *Isn't all information available for free over the Internet?*

**No!** This is a popular misconception. The NLC Library pays thousands of dollars each year for subscriptions to scholarly journals and other sources so that you, the student, can access high-quality, academic information for your research. Most of these resources are password-protected and available only to students, faculty, and staff affiliated with the college. Public libraries also subscribe to databases for their patrons, so be sure to check with your local public library for additional resources.

### *Who creates and evaluates the content of websites?*

**Everybody and nobody!** Anyone can create a website within minutes, often for free. Since there is no governing body or organization that oversees web publication, there is nobody responsible for evaluating the content of websites. When looking at a website, it is up to you to determine who created it, whether that person or organization is who they claim to be, and whether the information is likely to be true – not an easy task! In contrast, all resources from the library have already been evaluated for you. However, you still need to apply critical thinking to determine if a particular library source fits your information need.

### *Should I use websites as part of my research?*

**Maybe.** This depends on several factors, most importantly, whether your instructor has given you permission to do so. Some instructors specify that you must only use information which meets various criteria, such as from scholarly journals. In this case, a website would *not* be an acceptable source. Some instructors do allow you to use websites as sources; in this case, we recommend you start your research with the [library catalog](#) and [databases](#) and proceed to websites only if you need additional information. You can also look for websites that have already been evaluated by NLC librarians on our [Hotlinks page](#).

### ***Questions to ask when evaluating websites:***

- ***Author***
  - *Who created the page?* It may be helpful to look for an “About Us” or similar link. The responsible party may be a personal author or organization, agency, etc. If you cannot determine the author, this is probably a bad sign.
  - *What are their qualifications/credentials?* It is important to determine whether the person/organization is qualified to write about the topic.
  - *Is author contact information provided?* Lack of contact information can be a bad sign, as the author(s) are not available for further information.
- ***Publisher***
  - *Who published the page?* It may be helpful to look at the URL (web address) itself, as the publisher’s server is often named in the first part of the URL. Check to see if the website is from an official organization, or if it is a personal page (often less reliable).
  - *What is the domain type?* The domain extension is normally found in the last part of the URL. Government (.gov) sites, educational (.edu) sites, and organizational (.org) sites are often, but ***not always***, better than commercial (.com) sites. The .net extension, originally intended for network operators, is now rather general and can signify an organizational site, commercial site, or other.
- ***Purpose***
  - *Why was it written?* Everything on the web was created for a particular purpose, which may be explicitly stated, or just implied.
  - *Is it biased?* Try to determine if the site is expressing someone’s opinion (most are!) or objectively stating facts. Depending on your information need, bias might not necessarily be bad, but it should be recognized.
  - *Is it selling or advertising something?* These type of websites are obviously biased towards particular products, and do not present an objective point of view. Read the actual content of the website to help determine this as it may not always be obvious.
- ***Audience***
  - *For what type of audience was it written?* Websites are often geared towards specific audiences, for example, the general public, students, children, or specialists in a particular field. The terminology used can help you determine this.
- ***Currency***
  - *When was it last updated?* Check for a “last updated” date somewhere on the page, although pages can be updated for a number of reasons – to change a phone number, for example.
  - *Is the information current?* For time-sensitive topics, make sure the information is not out-of-date. Undated statistics or facts may be suspicious!

- **Linkages**
  - *What types of sites does it link to?* Check to see if it links to high-quality, authoritative sites.
  - *Do the links work?* Dead links normally imply that the author is no longer maintaining the page, in which case you should question the currency of the information.
  - *What sites link to it?* If you found the website via a link on another website you trust, this is a good sign. Try a link search on Google – link: followed by the URL (web address) in question will return a list of sites which link to it.
- **Documentation**
  - *Is the source of the information documented/cited?* Reliable websites credit their sources for all information which is not “common knowledge”.
  - *What type of sources were used?* Check to see if the sources seem authoritative and reliable.
- **Overall Impression**
  - *Does the information make sense?* Take the time to actually read and examine the content of the website, and apply critical thinking skills.
  - *Does it match your information needs?* Take into account the level of detail, bias vs. objectivity, terminology used, etc.

### **Domain extensions or dot what?**

Another evaluation tool is to examine the URL or address of a web site. Top level domains (TLDs) are coordinated by the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN). There are currently 21 generic TLDs. There are also country code top level domains for each nation, such as .uk for the UK and .eu for member states of the European Union.

The Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA) maintains a “Root Zone” database with all of the top-level domains and country codes. You can access the database by clicking here: <http://www.iana.org/domains/root/db/> The domain names are listed alphabetically. You can also click on select lists from the database including:

[ccTLDs](#) **Country Codes**   [gTLDs](#) **General top domains** and   [IDNs](#) **International top domains**

The most common top level domains are:

- .com – commercial
- .org – organization
- .net – network
- .edu – U.S. educational institutions
- .gov – U.S. Government
- .mil – U.S. military
- .int – registering organizations established by international treaties

It is important to remember that although the top level domains are registered with the IANA and ICANN, they do not regulate the content of websites. Examining the URL extension is just one piece of the overall evaluation process.

***I used a website as a source for my paper. Do I need to cite it?***

***Absolutely!*** Just because information is presented via the web instead of in a book or journal, does not mean you can use it without giving proper credit to the source. In fact, to do so would be *plagiarism* – a serious academic offense. Any time you use a direct quote or paraphrase information from a website, you *must* credit the source via in-text citations and inclusion in the bibliography at the end of your paper (sometimes called “References” or “Works Cited”). Be sure to adhere to the proper citation style as specified by your instructor – APA, MLA, Chicago, etc.

***Helpful links for additional information:***

- Evaluating Web Pages: Techniques to Apply and Questions to Ask (from the University of California – Berkeley Library)  
<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/Evaluate.html>
- Five Criteria for Evaluating Web Pages (from Cornell University Library)  
<http://www.library.cornell.edu/olinuris/ref/research/webcrit.html>
- Evaluating Information Found on the Internet (from Johns Hopkins University Sheridan Libraries)  
<http://www.library.jhu.edu/researchhelp/general/evaluating/index.html>