

Using the World Wide Web for Research in English

The World Wide Web offers access to a virtually unlimited amount of information in numerous formats, from official government documents to the personal reflections of pre-schoolers. Unlike printed books or magazines, the Web has no editors to maintain any kind of quality standards. The challenge for those using the Web for research is to sort among these many sources for those which are reliable, accurate, current, and ethically sound.

Because Web sites and search engine listings change constantly, it is impractical to offer a list of useful sites. We can, however, provide some general guidelines for evaluating Web-based sources. Please adapt them to the specific circumstances of your research, particularly the assignment given by your instructor.

Is the Web the best place to find what I need?

The Web can provide some kinds of information that are difficult to access in libraries. Statistics kept by official government agencies, including the Census Bureau, are examples. Any statistics you use should come from official agencies (See "Is the Site Sponsor Credible?" below.), and the agency's name should be readily apparent.

Historical and biographical information about authors and their times is generally more accurate and reliable in book form. Universities that sponsor research continue to respect the printed word over the electronic text; authors who want to sell the books they have researched will not give away the contents on the Web. Meredith's library is well stocked with background sources on literary periods and figures. Some biographical Web sites may be excellent, but unless you verify the facts you cannot be certain.

Is the Site Sponsor credible?

When you reach a site that looks interesting, look for the name of the individual author and the organization that he or she represents. Be wary when you find only first names; authors should take responsibility for their work. Respectable sponsors include colleges and universities, official government agencies; newspapers and magazines (although printed publications may offer only excerpts as a means to sell subscriptions). Sometimes a site will be a class project, led by a professor but compiled by students. If so, keep in mind that your sources are now your peers.

The suffix of the Web address (URL) tells you if the site is sponsored by a educational institution (.edu) a government agency (.gov), a nonprofit organization (.org), or a private company (.com).

Is the site current?

Look for a date that tells when the site was last revised. Some are revised every few hours, while others are posted and abandoned by their creators. If the information you need is time sensitive, take the revision date into account. The Web is full of zombie pages, created in a burst of energy and then abandoned.

How can I separate fact from opinion?

Because the Web is a highly effective channel for voicing one's opinion, finding like minds and even organizing political action, Web sites are often subjective in content. Some opinions and perspectives are stated directly, while other perspectives—often extremist ones—are disguised as more objective information. When you study a controversial topic, it is helpful to consider a number of views. At the same time, you will want to double check facts and statistics presented by organizations that you know

hold a clear position on an issue. Sites devoted to particular writers may be less informative than celebratory. A current site listing the characters of a Jane Austen novel, for instance, praises the author but misrepresents the characters and the plot.

Are author societies useful sources?

Most authors studied in English classes have international societies of faithful readers and scholars. These organizations range from fan clubs to rigorous academic communities, and their Web sites reflect this diversity. Background information on authors and literary periods is probably more reliable than that compiled by students. Your instructor will have a good sense of how reliable a specific author society is.

Is literary criticism available on the Web?

Scholars who write literary criticism generally do so in order to earn tenure and promotion at a college or university. They seek out juried journals and prestigious university presses to publish their work, and these journals and presses rely upon sales and subscriptions for their survival. As a result, current and highly respected literary criticism simply does not appear on the Web. NCLive has changed this situation to some degree, but not significantly. For a critical study of an author or a work, the MLA Bibliography (bookmarked on the library computers) is still the place to begin. If you find a journal article that looks interesting, you can search NCLive by journal title.

What about online journals?

There are a few online journals that publish literary criticism. Other online versions of literary journals offer abstracts or tables of contents only, while full text articles call for a payment.

Is it useful to follow links?

Surfing the Web can be a wild and wonderful ride as you follow links from site to site. It's a great idea to follow links that look interesting, but please bookmark any site that you want to find again. (Highlight the URL (address)/click on Bookmark/click on Add Bookmark.) Also, although a reputable site probably won't knowingly link to a disreputable one, you should evaluate each site on its own merits. A link is not a wholehearted endorsement of another site's content.

Where did that Web site go?

If you find a site that seems useful, browse it immediately and get the information you need. You may want to print a copy of the site. If you are working on your own computer, you can bookmark it for later use. But even if you bookmark the site, keep in mind that it may change or disappear at any time without notice. Bookmarking a site lets you try to connect again, but it does not copy the site onto your computer. When you take information from a site, get the items you need for documentation: the URL, author, title, sponsor/publisher, and the date you accessed the site.

Citing Internet Sources

Author. Title. Publication medium. Computer network. Name of person maintaining site. Date of access. Address [Available:].

Example:

Yu, Gene. *The Story Space Cluster: Daughter's Wedding*. Online. Internet. Brown University. 5 Nov 1997. Available: <http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/hypertext/landow/>.

NOTE: Place a slash before the final period in the citations on your "Works Cited" list. It should be clear to your reader that the period is part of the citation, not part of the Web address.