

A word about copyright

Information which is published on the internet, including texts, music, images and video, is covered by the copyright laws of its country of origin in the same way that printed or recorded material is protected. Often you can use internet materials freely in your own work but, if there is any kind of statement restricting use, you must abide by it. Usually this will simply involve acknowledging authorship in your work but you may be requested to e-mail the author to ask permission to use his or her material and you may be asked to pay a small fee.

.... and a word about plagiarism

Cutting and pasting sections of text from the web and passing them off as your own work constitutes plagiarism and carries severe penalties. It is not difficult for lecturers to trace material from the web so you should always give a complete reference for any website you cite.

Also, websites change - some are frequently updated and others are removed altogether, so you need to include in your citation the date on which you found the information. An example of how to do this is given below:-

McKenzie BC (1995, December 12), *Medicine and the Internet* [Online] (URL <http://www.oup.co.uk/NetMed/mned3.html>) Oxford: Oxford University Press

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The Learning Support Guide to: Using the Internet

The Internet is a vast resource offering quick and easy access to information on almost every subject area. The MMU library website will point you towards a broad range of web-based resources which you know are of a high standard. But what of other internet materials? A simple search will often result in a long list of websites, some containing information which you think might be useful for your assignments. But the Internet is also unregulated and unmanaged and not all of the information you find there will be of high quality. So how can you decide if the sources you find are appropriate for your work? You need to evaluate each website before deciding whether or not to use it. Here are some criteria you might find helpful.

• What is the source of the information?

Ask yourself who has put this information onto the Internet. You should be able to tell from the URL, a heading on the first page, a brief biography of the author or a footnote at the end, whether the website has some reputable organisation or expert behind it. If you have never heard of the author or organisation, use the internet to search again for more information about them.

You might find the author's e-mail address or other contact details at the beginning or end of the website. Do make contact to ask for clarification or updated information, and see what response you get.

- **How old is the information?**

Certain subject areas (e.g. science) are rapidly changing and developing, so your source may quickly become out of date. You should be able to see when the information was created, published and last updated. Authors and researchers do not always publish their most recent work on the internet, so you may find more current information in scholarly journals and books.

- **Who is the intended audience?**

Try to assess who are the intended users of the resource. A text clearly written for the layperson may not carry the same level of detail or breadth of coverage as one intended for a subject expert or student. It may be useful as a primary source but less so as an example of in depth analysis.

- **Is the content well presented?**

A website that is well designed and appropriately presented can help you to evaluate the quality of the text, image, etc. Good navigation aids, such as a site search engine or comprehensive index, will point you to the information you need quickly and easily. Ask yourself whether links to other resources are appropriate and kept up to date and whether multimedia displays enhance rather than distract.

- **Is the content accurate?**

If you have doubts about the accuracy of the information given, try to check it against other resources. If the information is presented as fact, check whether the author points you towards other websites or printed documents which back this up.

- **Is the content relevant?**

You may find many excellent and interesting websites but not all will be appropriate for your particular needs. It is tempting to include website material to show off your searching skills but ask yourself if the information you have found is really relevant to the question you have to answer. For example, if you have been asked to use primary sources, you will need to find original accounts of events, raw data and facts rather than information which has been analysed and interpreted.

- **Is there evidence of bias?**

Some authors or publishers try to influence their reader by presenting a specific point of view. Look at the language used to see if it is impartial and objective, or emotionally charged and persuasive. The internet is an excellent medium for reaching a large number of people cheaply and quickly, so it is a good idea to ask yourself what motivation the author had for placing these ideas in the public arena. Is there evidence of a strong political or ideological bias? Or are the arguments balanced and well founded? Is the website simply an advertising or marketing tool for a product or organisation? Or is it an attempt to persuade or subvert? Be aware that the internet is used to disseminate biased or even subversive material and show your awareness of this if you use such material.

- **Finally, is the text well written?**

In the end though, it is the quality of the writing which matters. Ask yourself if the author is communicating clearly and then go on to evaluate what is written against the above criteria. If you are satisfied that the source is a good one, go ahead and use it in your work. If you have doubts, seek further advice before presenting it as an authoritative text on which to base your arguments.