Evaluating Internet Sources video, edited transcript

[0:09] If a stranger came up and started speaking to you on the street, you'd probably want to know a little bit more about him and what he was saying before you took him seriously. The same goes for websites. There's a lot of useful information on the internet, but since anyone with web access can publish to it, it's crucial to evaluate those sources when considering their information.

[0:30] In this tutorial, you'll learn about the importance of evaluating information on the internet. You'll learn about some questions to consider when you're looking at websites, and you'll get some practical tips about how to evaluate internet sites.

[0:46] Many of us use the internet to gather information for all sorts of things. We might use that information to make medical decisions, political decisions, financial decisions, or social decisions. Our whole way of viewing the world is based on the information that we encounter, and these days, a lot of that information comes from the internet. That's why it's so important to really evaluate and look at the information that you find on the internet.

[1:18] Of course, evaluating internet information is also good for your assignments. It'll make your research better, strengthen your arguments, and get you a better grade.

[1:29] Keep in mind that while Google is a great search engine, there are others out there to try too. Different search engines work in different ways and will return different results. It's good to review as many results as you can manage. That's not to say that you'll ever be able to look at all of the results on a given topic, but only looking at the first few hits on a given search probably won't give you a very good idea about different things that have been written on your topic.

[1:59] When you're looking at a website, first ask yourself: Who wrote this information? What can you gather about the author's background? Is the author an expert on this topic? Is he or she very opinionated on this topic? How does that inform what the author has written? You might have to do a little bit of digging to find out about your page’s author.

[2:21] If you don't see the author's name immediately, look for links such as "info", "about", or other terms that might lead you to more information about the page’s author.

[2:33] Once you have the author's name, try Googling it to get some more information about other things that author might have written or things that other people have said about him or her. When you know a little bit more about the author, think about how what you've learned impacts what he or she has written. This can help you to decide whether or not to use this website as a source that you want to use to make decisions or base your research on. If you do decide to use the site, knowing about the author will help you to analyze the information you found and use it more effectively.

[3:10] Next, consider the type of site that this information is coming from. Is the page supported by a group, organization, or company? What does the group stand to gain by convincing others of its points? This could be monetary, political, or something else. Is the information likely to have been reviewed by other people before it was published, or is this information from a personal site where someone is expressing his own opinions?

[3:38] Again, you might have to look around a little bit on the site to figure out who supports the points that are being expressed, or potential biases these groups might hold. You can look for "info" or "about" links. The URL can also be helpful. Educational or governmental sites are more likely to provide more objective information. Commercial sites are usually motivated to make money in some way. Tildes (~) or percent signs (%) followed by personal names usually indicate personal sites. Shortening the URL to find the homepage of the site that  you’re viewing might also give you more information about any groups or organizations that this information is aligned with.

[4:22] When you know more about potential motivations or biases associated with the site, think about how these might affect the information that you’re viewing. Also consider your own emotional attachment to the content of the site. Are you able to objectively evaluate it?

[4:41] Next, ask yourself what sort of evidence the author provides for the points that he or she is trying to make. Does the site list citations for, or link out to, other websites, data, or print resources? Do links provided actually work? Can you verify evidence used on the site? Does the site rely on evidence from many different sources or just a couple? The more verifiable evidence that a site uses, the more likely that the information that that site is trying to convey is accurate.

[5:20] Finally, consider when this information was published or last updated. People view different topics differently and talk about them in different ways at different times. Make sure the site you're viewing is either up-to-date or published at a time that is relevant to the topic you're studying.

[5:42] Here are some tips about how to find information that will allow you to evaluate websites. We've mentioned a few already. Scan the perimeter of the page and look for links such as "about", "info," the author's name, the publication date. Remember that shortening the URL to find the website’s homepage might help you get more information about sponsors of the site or organizations that are aligned with it.

[6:11] After getting information from the website itself, try doing an outside search for any author's names or organization titles to see what other people have said about these entities.

[6:22] Finally, remember to think of the big picture. How do all the clues that you've discovered impact the information that you're trying to decide to use as a source for your paper or for decisions that you make in your life?

[6:39] When you're researching on the web, be a skeptic. When you're taking in any information, it's good to think about factors that might impact it. This will help you to make stronger arguments and better decisions. You'd be skeptical about a stranger’s word on the street—it’s good to think about internet sources in the same way.