

Improving Media Literacy

By Lorrie Jackson

WHY A TECHTORIAL?

What will I learn today?

You will learn easy-to-remember steps that will help you evaluate the quality of a Web site.

What hardware and/or software does the techtorial apply to?

This techtorial applies to any computer with Internet access.

Which National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers does the techtorial address?

The techtorial will help teachers accomplish standard II.c, II.d, VI.c, and VI.d in particular.

The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) has developed a set of National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers. Standards or Performance Indicators are included for each techtorial to help teachers and administrators improve technology proficiency. For a complete description of the standards indicated, go to [NETS for Teachers](#), click Standards in the menu bar on the left, and then click the arrow to the right of Standards and Performance Indicators for Teachers.

WHY LEARN TO EVALUATE WEB SITES?

No one controls or verifies the vast majority of information posted on the Internet. With a little money and 30 minutes, almost anyone can publish a basic Web page.

Although some sites have editorial staff and experts to ensure accuracy and quality, many do not. Choosing quality Web sites to use in your classroom or for lesson preparation can be a time consuming endeavor.

You can make that endeavor easier and more successful, however, by using **COCOA P** (and your instincts) to find the class among the trash on the Internet!

COCOA P:

C = Coverage

O = Objectivity

C = Currency

O = Origin (Author)

A = Accuracy

P = Purpose

GOLDILOCKS'S 'JUST RIGHT' PRINCIPLE

Determine whether the site **covers** the topic appropriately for your purpose and for your audience.

- * Choose your topic.
- * Decide how you're going to use the information -- to prep for a lesson? to share with students?
- * Make sure the site is neither too advanced nor too basic for your needs. You might not need a doctoral dissertation to prep for tomorrow's history lecture, but you don't need an elementary school student's page as your primary source either.

JUST THE FACTS, JACK!

Most of the time, you want **objective** sources.

- * Look for sites -- such as encyclopedias or dictionaries -- that provide just the facts.
- * Avoid sites that project bias or prejudice.
- * Avoid sites that contain profanity, name-calling, or racist or sexist language.
- * Avoid sites that use emotion-laden or strongly opinionated language.

- * On commercial sites, look for advertisements geared toward educators. Sites with ads that target teachers are more likely to have information designed for teachers.

IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK

How current is the page? When it comes to Web sites, **currency** refers to time, not money!

- * When today's teachers were students, two-year-old books were considered to be up-to-date resources. Today, two years old is too old; Web sites must be updated constantly.
- * The topic determines how frequently a site should be updated. Current event sites should be updated daily. Sites featuring historical information or less time-sensitive research should be updated every few months. Even old subjects have new discoveries, so don't waste time on old sites!
- * Most quality Web sites indicate the date of the most recent update. Be aware, however, that "Last Updated" only tells you when *something* on the site was changed. What changed might not have been actual information; it might only have been a color or a picture.

APPEARANCES CAN BE DECEIVING

What is the **origin** of the Web site?

- * Is the author or sponsoring organization an expert on the topic you're researching? (Caution: The title "Dr." in front of an author's name on a medical page does not always mean the author has a medical or health-related degree!)
- * Does the site include the author's credentials? Do those credentials show that the author has experience and/or education in the field you're researching?
- * Look for Web sites created by organizations or authors who are unbiased, experienced, and informed about your topic.

GET OUT THE RED PEN!

Correct spelling and grammar can indicate factual **accuracy** too.

- * Good Web authors spend as much time proofing their pages as they do ensuring that the facts are current and objective. Lots of mistakes or omitted words on a page can indicate a young, inexperienced, or unreliable author.
- * Scan a site: If you count three or more substantial typos, move on!
- * Be aware that some excellent international sites have typos related to translation problems. Don't discount a mistake-filled site from a non-English speaking country without first assessing the facts!

WHAT'S THE POINT?

Is the **purpose** of the site to inform, to persuade, or to entertain?

For most educational research, including lesson planning, choose sites that inform.

Persuasive sites can be helpful for teaching students how to evaluate arguments or the media.

If you are suspicious about the motives of a Web author or the purpose of a site, move on!

TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS

Some Web sites are cleverly designed to fool you into thinking they're credible. If a site doesn't feel right, move on.

Check out [The Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus](#). The site contains few errors, is updated regularly, appears unbiased, and the author seems well informed. What does your gut tell you, though?

Millions and millions of sites are available on the Web; don't waste valuable time on a site you're not sure about!

By remembering **COCOA P** and trusting your instincts, you'll quickly find quality Web sites for your own research and for your student lessons.

MORE INFORMATION

The following Web sites can provide additional information on Web site evaluation:

- [Evaluation Criteria](#): a detailed Web evaluation instrument that's good for high school or university use.
- [Health Related Web Site Evaluation Form](#): a Web evaluation instrument specifically designed for health-related topics.
- [Techniques for Evaluating Native American Web Sites](#)
- [I Read It On the Internet: Teaching About Web Literacy](#)
- [Fact, Fiction, or Opinion: Evaluating Online Information](#)