

Student Scope

Developing Critical Literacy

by Georgia Green, CMT

“What’s your source?”

— Vera Pyle

Don’t believe everything you hear.

Your parents probably told you that. At an early age, however, you developed trust in the printed word—school books, magazine articles, newspaper stories. Even the most cynical individual has some expectation that material in print must have received someone’s seal of approval before it went to the printer. This expectation carries over to the Internet where there is so much material on a near-infinite number of topics—all appearing in “virtual” print. Do you really need to be concerned about the accuracy of what you read on-line?

Before you read an article in a medical journal or an academic textbook, its contents have already been evaluated by a team of editors and peer reviewers. You may not be in a position to judge the validity of the author’s conclusions, but you know the publisher has a reputation to maintain and carefully considers what is fit to print. But anyone can publish a Web page, and some of the most impressive-looking Web pages are created by amateurs in their field of expertise. This is great news for the novice author who must compete with professionals to break into print, but bad news for you—the information consumer.

You must make an effort to investigate the source of material on the World Wide Web before accepting it as fact. You can apply the same criteria when evaluating any form of information, whether it appears in print, on television, or on the Internet. Elizabeth Kirk, electronic and distance education librarian at Johns Hopkins University, recommends that you apply these criteria when evaluating information:

- Authority
- Accuracy
- Currency

Authority. If the information is attributed to a particular author and you recognize the author as an authority in this particular field, you can assign a high level of trust. If you don’t recognize the author, you should investigate the author’s credentials. If no biographical information is available on that

Web site about the author, use a search engine to locate additional information. Does the author have education or experience in the field? Is this author quoted by other authors whose authority you do accept? Does the author’s associations lend to or detract from her credibility? For example, an author who is listed as a consultant for a commercial entity may not be unbiased where that entities products are concerned. Do Web sites whose content you trust provide links to this author’s material? Don’t make assumptions the other way around, i.e., if an author provides links to trusted sites that does not mean that these sites approve of this author. If you can find no other information on the author, can you contact him yourself through the Web site and request background information?

If you can’t find information about the author or can’t locate the author’s name, you may be able to investigate the sponsor of the Web site hosting the page. If the name of the sponsoring body is not visible on the page, is there a link to the Webmaster somewhere on the page? This information usually appears at the very bottom of the main page. If you can’t find a Webmaster link, take a look at the URL. Is this an official site of a professional or commercial entity or an educational institution? If so, contact that organization to verify the information as many organizations give students, employees, or even the general public free Web pages for personal use. Likewise, there are many free Web hosting services like Geocities or AOL Homepages where anyone can post information. Information contained on personal Web pages should be carefully scrutinized for accuracy by investigating the author’s original sources. Unfortunately, an official sounding domain name does little to lend authority as anyone with \$35 can register a domain name. However, you can use a domain name lookup service to obtain the identity of the person or company who registered a domain name. If a Web site called www.cancertruths.com was registered to a tobacco company, the site may not contain unbiased information.

Accuracy. In evaluating accuracy of Web site information, it is helpful to ask yourself why the author has provided the information. Whose interests are being served through the Web site? Who sponsored the site? Are there conflicts of interest you need to consider? Some very helpful information—even FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)—are advertisements for the product they describe. If you encounter very negative information about a person or product, is the Web

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site sponsored by a competitor or someone associated with a competitor. Extreme views are easily disguised as factual information on the Internet. Likewise, the opinions of individuals or organizations on controversial issues should not be accepted as fact even if they are presented that way. If a source is quoted, check out that source for yourself.

Currency. Is the information timely? You can start by asking when the Web site was last updated. Many Web sites include a publication or copyright date at the bottom of the main page. However, an update made to one page does not ensure that all the pages have been updated. Nor does a recent copyright date ensure that the information presented on a particular page is current. If the author provide dates of publication for any sources she cites? Examine the sources.

A Needle in the Haystack

When researching information on the World Wide Web with a search engine, you may get back thousands of “hits” unless you provide adequate parameters to narrow your search. But even if you get only 50 hits, you may be tempted to click through only those listed on the first page or so, especially when the search engine claims that the hits are listed by “relevance.” It is important to note, however, that “relevance” has little to do with authority, accuracy, or currency. Every search engine uses its own criteria for ranking Web pages. Some rely only on the key words (called “meta tags”) embedded in a Web page by its author. Others may use the

“If you find information that is ‘too good to be true,’ it probably is. Never use information that you cannot verify.”

— Elizabeth Kirk
Johns Hopkins University

page title, page description, and/or some or all of the page content. According to Elizabeth Kirk, “Some Internet search engines ‘sell’ top space to advertisers who pay them to do so.” Find out how your favorite search engine ranks pages.

By following the suggestions above, and by employing a healthy dose of skepticism, you can develop a high degree of critical literacy.

Georgia Green, CMT, is Director of Education for Health Professions Institute in Modesto, CA. She has 24 years of experience as a practitioner and educator in the medical industry. She served as consultant and technical writer for medical transcription software products, including the CD versions of Vera Pyle’s *Current Medical Terminology*, *The SUM Program* (Health Professions Institute), and *Medical Transcription Fundamentals & Practice* (Prentice Hall), as well as *Li'l Red Notebook* (Horus Development).

