Thinking critically about web information

The free Internet is only one of a variety of information options. **Quality physical and online resources provided by the College should be used in preference to the 'free' Internet where possible.**
At some point, however, you *will* definitely use the 'free' Internet for information. The Internet can be a great source of information but not all Web resources are created equal.

Why is it important to evaluate information you find on the internet?

- Anyone can publish information on the Internet
- Unlike traditional print resources, websites rarely have editors or academic reviewers
- No standards exist to ensure accuracy on the Internet (Germain & Horn, 2007).

You therefore, need to be critical in choosing the information to use. The rule of thumb is **'when in doubt, doubt.'**

Evaluating information is an essential skill you will need to use throughout your lifetime. You will want to base your learning, and your professional and personal decisions, on information that is accurate, reliable and relevant to your needs. When you carefully select your resources, and you understand their strengths and limits, you will make more informed decisions and create better products.

When you do decide to use the Internet, make sure you examine the site and the information critically. Use the **Web Information Checklist** to help you decide if the information you have found is accurate, reliable and relevant.

Want a digital version of the checklist with tick boxes etc. that you can fill in for each site you use?
Go to the *Inquiry Support* page of the Yourlibrary@MLC website and look under 'Thinking critically about Web Information'.

Web Information Checklist

Apply these questions to all information you find – especially in documents and sites on the Web. **A quality website will provide clear answers to most of these questions**. If you find early in your examination of the site that you are not finding many positive answers, consider choosing another site.

How do I find the answers I need on the website?
- Examine the header (top) and scroll to the footer (end) of the web page for copyright information.
- Look for a links such as: 'About us' or 'Copyright'.
- Go back through the host site looking for clues. If you can't do this easily, progressively delete from the URL (web address) until only the stem / root remains. eg. You would trim this address:
  http://www.mlc.wa.edu.au/view/20060125174714/20051012110705/ back to:
  http://www.mlc.wa.edu.au/

Authority - What are the author's qualifications for writing on this subject?

? Who is the author of the page/site? (If the author, person or group responsible for the information is not stated, reject this site.)

? What are the author's qualifications to write on the topic? Does the author/group give information about his/her/their qualifications, position, education, experience etc. relevant to the provision of this information?

? Is the author/group the original creator of the information?

? Is there a common link to the page **from** one of recognised authority?

❑ **Are you satisfied that the author has the background and experience necessary to write with authority on this subject?**

Purpose - Why does this information exist?

? What appears to be the purpose of the information?

? to inform	**?** to explain
? to persuade	**?** to entertain
? to sell something	

? What is the domain name (.com, .gov, .edu, .org, etc) and does it provide any clues to possible bias? It can tell you if the site is registered as commercial, education, government, organisation etc. Ask yourself, 'Does the information provider have a vested interest in a certain point of view?' e.g. Commercial organisations (.com) will obviously want to sell their product.

.edu	educational institution e.g. schools and universities
.gov	government agencies
.org	organisations
.net	networks e.g. internet service providers
.com	commercial sites e.g. companies

? Is there a tilde ~ in the URL? This often indicates someone's personal page, so even in an educational institution's site; this may represent a personal view or student assignment. (Remember, there's no guarantee they did well on that assignment!)

? What organisation (company, government, political party, university etc) sponsors or supports the information on this site?

? Does the author's affiliation with this group appear to bias the information?

? Is the information fact, opinion or propaganda? Does the point of view appear objective and impartial?

❑ **Are you satisfied that the site is reasonably free from bias?**
   OR
❑ **If you are looking for opinions, and are aware of the bias represented in this information, have you found a balancing counter-opinion?**

Accuracy - How reliable and accurate is this information?

? Has the site been reviewed and recommended by a reliable source e.g. MLC catalogue or online databases like *Britannica online*?

? Is the information supported by evidence? Are sources given for information on the page/site? Is a reference list provided?

? Can you verify any of the information in another source or does the information conflict with information from other sources?

? Does the author/publisher provide an e-mail address or other method by which you can contact them and verify the facts? (Have you done so?)

? Has the information undergone any editorial review? (eg the online version of a periodical like *Scientific American* or a newspaper like *The Australian* may be assumed to be subject to the same standards of editing and review as the print version.)

? Are there spelling, grammar or other typographical errors?

❑ **Are you satisfied that this information is accurate and reliable?**

Currency - To what extent is the information current or up-to-date?

? When was the information first written or the website first created?

? When was the website last updated or revised?

❑ Is the information sufficiently up-to-date for your needs?

Coverage - What extent of coverage of the subject / topic is intended?

? Does the information relate to your topic or answer your question?

? Who is the intended audience? (Academics, small children, students, business people, net surfers?)

? Can you read and understand the information? Is the level appropriate for you?

? Is there a clear statement of the topics you will find covered on the page/s?

? Is there any indication of the depth of coverage you can expect to find?

❑ **Is the information at the right level for your use and is the subject treated in enough depth to meet your needs?**

Conclusion

❑ **Given the examination you have made of this site/page, is the information appropriate and useful for your purpose?**
   (Have you been able to tick all of the boxes?)

References

Alexander, J., & Tate, M. (1998). *Checklist for an information web page*. Retrieved November 5, 1998, from http://www.science.widener.edu/~withers/inform.htm

Germain, C. A., & Horn, L. (2007). *Evaluating internet sites 101*. Retrieved November 15, 2012, http://library.albany.edu/usered/webeval/

Grassian, E. (1998). *Thinking critically about world wide web resources*. Retrieved November 5, 1998, http://www.ecla.edu/campus/computing/bruinonline/trainers/critical.html

Hlodan, O. (2007). Criteria for web site evaluation. Retrieved November 14, 2012, from http://www.slideshare.net/scilit/criteria-for-web-site-evaluation

Lesley University Library. (2007). *Evaluating web sites*. Retrieved November 14, 2012, from http://www.lesley.edu/library/guides/research/evaluating_web.html

QUICK: the quality information checklist. (2000). Retrieved November 8, 2007, from http://www.avon.k12.ct.us/enrichment/Enrich/quickgr4-0.htm

Tufts University. (2009). *Criteria for evaluating websites*. Retrieved November 15, 2012, from http://www.library.tufts.edu/tisch/webeval.htm

Valenza, J. (2001). *A WebQuest for evaluating websites*. Retrieved October 29, 2003, from http://mciu.org/~spjvweb/evalwebstu.html

Westera, G. (1996). Assessing the quality of web pages. *Biblia (3)*, 7.