TIPS FOR EVALUATING INTERNET SOURCES

Currency

- **Is the content up to date?** Some web sites will have a date created or an update date. Current information is crucial for some subjects and unimportant for others.
- **Look for dates of any statistics that are used.**

Relevance

- **Who is the targeted audience?** Language can be a useful clue as to whether the intended audience is the general public or professionals in the subject.
- **Too elementary or too advanced?**
- **Will this be a useful addition to the information you have already gathered?** Would you be better off consulting another source?

Authority

- **Who is the author of the web page?** Is there a way to comment or contact the author of the page? If you know the sponsor or author of a source, you can make some assumptions about the purpose of the article and any possible bias. For instance, even the official sites of the Democratic and Republican parties have an agenda. Certainly the NRA site would have a definite point of view regarding gun control.
- **Does the author cite experience or credentials? Is the author affiliated with certain organizations or institutions?** Could the listed credentials be fake? Google the author to see what you can find.
- **Does the page have a corporate sponsor?**
- **What is the domain address (.gov, .edu, .com, .org, .mil)?** The domain is not always a valid indicator of reliability, but can sometimes help. For instance, .gov is a government agency, .edu is educational or affiliated, .com is commercial (which may be trying to sell something), .org is a non profit organization, .mil is a military site. Homepages of individuals frequently have a ~ (tilde) sign in the url. Note: many individual home pages have very useful and valid information.

Accuracy

- **Does the article contain footnotes, a bibliography or links to sources?** Remember, bibliographical information may be fabricated with sources made up.
- **How well has the author documented the sources of information?** Beware if there is information that could have been linked but is copied into the document. It could have been abridged to lose meaning or it could have been altered.
- **Is the information an abridgement of a more comprehensive source? If so, is the information presented in context?**
- **What geographical area is covered, and from what geographical area is the page originated?** Helps to identify point of view of the author(s).
Purpose

• **What is the purpose of the web site?** The motivation behind the site may dictate the content and bias of the material. Is the site informational? For entertainment? To sell a product, political agenda or point of view? As a teaching aid?

• **Is there an identifiable bias or prejudice?**

Other Aspects

• **Are there costs to access the material, or does the page request the user’s e-mail address or personal information to proceed?** Many times the registration information is used for advertising and mailing list.

• **Is the information easily accessible and easy to navigate? This is a hard question to answer, but will the information be available if needed at a later date?** Pop-up ads, broken links, and misspelled words hurt the credibility of a web site.

• **Who links to the page?** In most search engines, you can type link: before the url and see who links to the page.

This handout is written by Susan Newman, Coordinator of Reference Services in the Mississippi College Leland Speed Library. Only the format has been changed.