Evaluating Online Sources

Undoubtedly, it was much easier when you could assume that a skilled librarian had selected a resource in a library for the collection. Those days are gone. Currently, when you are look online for information, it’s up to you to decide what’s reliable and what isn’t. You have to look closely and critically.

The URL (Uniform Resource Locator, which is the Internet address) may help you. If the suffix is “edu,” the source is an educational institution. If it is “com,” it’s a commercial site; if it is “org,” it’s an organization of some kind. Probably “edu” is the most reliable, but that doesn’t mean the others can’t be as well. However, if you find a “~” in the URL, it’s a personal page, and that gives you less assurance about the reliability of the information (and suggests the page is much more likely to disappear).

What else should you consider? First, the author’s credentials can be helpful. You’ll find these on many educational and some other sites. Consider the site itself and what credibility it appears to have.

If you can, find out how current the information is. Some times it may not matter (mythology has been around a long time), but sometimes more currency is better. Think about relevancy as well—make sure the information you’ve found is really applicable to the topic of your research and your goal for using it.

Also, consider the purpose of the document you’re considering. Is it focused on presenting information in an unbiased manner? Do you get a sense that what you’re reading is logical and well thought out? Does it seem to be based on reliable information? Is it complete enough or does it just seem to be bits of this and pieces of something else?

There’s a lot of information waiting for you online, but be a careful buyer. Choose what you think you can count on and be willing to defend that choice.