

# Evaluating and Rating Websites and Other Information Resources

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Whenever you do research – especially legal research – you must evaluate the information you find before you rely on it. Although it is important to evaluate information published in any format, evaluation is particularly important for information found on the web. Anyone can publish something on the web at very little cost and subject to very few limitations.

Even information that was reliable when it was first published can become unreliable if it is not kept up-to-date, if the computer or network where the information resides is accidentally corrupted, or if the website is intentionally damaged. And the cues that an information source may not be reliable are not as obvious on the web as they can be in physical formats.

This research guide only addresses evaluating websites as potential resources for legal research. It does not discuss research to uncover ownership and related information about a particular website. If you need to conduct research about a website, I recommend the Pacifici article or the Virtual Chase website listed at the end of this guide.

The references listed at the end of this page describe the criteria for website evaluation in a variety of ways, which can be grouped under the following categories of questions:

- **Authority**
  - Who are the author and publisher?
  - What are the author's expertise and other credentials?
  - What is the publisher's authority to publish the information?
  - Is the web page on which you found the information part of a larger governmental, educational, or scholarly site?
- **Objectivity**
  - Does the author or publisher have a bias that could affect the reliability of the information?
  - Is that point of view clearly stated?
- **Accuracy**
  - Is the information accurate?
  - Is it complete?
  - Does the source provide citations so you can verify the information?
- **Coverage**
  - Does the source include all the information you need?
  - What time period is included?
  - Does the source only include information since a certain date?
- **Timeliness**
  - When was the information written?
  - When was it last updated?

## ***Authority***

Ask yourself who is making the information available. What are their credentials? Is the publisher an official source, or at least a reliable source, or is it someone whose bias may affect the accuracy or reliability of the information? If you cannot tell who is responsible for the information, you should hesitate to use it unless you can otherwise confirm its reliability.

With primary legal sources – such as judicial opinions, statutes, and regulations – the government is the author, and government websites (whose URLs end in *.gov*) are authoritative publishers. Educational websites (whose URLs end in *.edu*) are also frequently authorized to publish primary sources. However, when the information you find is a secondary source – something that was written to explain or comment on the law – you must evaluate the author's and publisher's authority, as well as their objectivity.

## ***Objectivity***

Just because an author or publisher has a particular bias does not mean that you must reject the information without further evaluation. Organizations that advocate for a particular point of view are frequently motivated to publish information related to their area of interest in a timely fashion. For example, an organization that files a lawsuit against a corporation or the government may make the documents in that lawsuit available on its website. Those documents would be difficult to find on any other free website.

Of course, if you find information on a website published by an organization representing one side of an issue, you must verify that the information is accurate, complete, and current. You must also distinguish between facts that can be verified and opinions presented as facts. And be cautious of any information you find from organizations that are not open about their point of view.

## ***Accuracy***

Before you rely on information, you must be sure that it is complete and accurate. Errors can occur even if a website is authoritative and unbiased. If you find information that is full of typographical errors and broken links, you should look for the information you need from a better source.

It is always a good idea to verify any information on which you want to rely. You can do that by checking the authorities cited or linked on a web page and by finding the same information in two or more places. The importance of your legal issue will help you determine how careful you should be that the information you find is accurate.

## ***Coverage***

When you are doing caselaw research on a topic, you usually need to have access to all the judicial opinions from the appropriate court(s), which could be federal, a specific state, or both.

The United States is a common-law system, and rulings in cases decided many years ago may still be good law if they have not been overruled, reversed, or changed by statute.

When you are doing statutory research, you need to have access to all the statutes in effect. This means that you should start your research in a statutory code, rather than in session laws. It also usually means that you will have to update your research with session laws passed since the last time the statutory code was updated.

### ***Timeliness***

Finally, you must evaluate legal information for currency. When was the web page you have found last updated? Primary legal information made available for free by the government is frequently out of date. You should be able to tell from a good website when it was last updated. If there is no statement about currency, you will have to find a way to be sure your information is up to date.

Most government agencies publishing information on the internet cannot afford the quality control necessary to guarantee accuracy, completeness, and timeliness. You will frequently find warnings on government pages to the effect that the information is made available as a public service, but it should not be relied upon unless it is confirmed by checking the official publication.

Finally, when you use the internet for legal research, keep in mind that only a small subset of legal materials are available on the internet. Primary legal resources, such as case opinions, statutes, and regulations, did not begin to appear on the internet until the mid-1990s. Very few older sources have been added. The case, statute, or regulation that you need may very well not be available on the internet.

### ***For More Information***

#### **CALI Lessons:**

(CALI lessons are licensed to law students at SIU and other CALI-member schools, and as part of CALI's \$50 Pre-Law School subscription at <http://www.learnthelaw.org/>)

Susan Llano and Erin Murphy, [Evaluating Web Sites](#) (2004)

Resa Kerns and Cindy Shearrer, [Internet Legal Resources - Free Resources](#) (2004)

#### **Articles:**

Genie Tyburski, *Get Smart About Web Site I.Q.*,  
<http://searchenginewatch.com/showPage.html?page=2159621> (April 4, 2002).

Paul Petruccelli, *Getting It Right: Shortcuts for Busy Practitioners to Evaluate Web Content*,  
<http://www.llrx.com/features/getright.htm> (March 18, 2002).

Sabrina Pacifici, *Getting It Right: Verifying Sources on the Net*,  
<http://www.llrx.com/features/verifying.htm> (March 1, 2002).

Genie Tyburski, *Assess the Quality of Information at a Web Site*,  
[http://www.virtualchase.com/howto/assess\\_quality.html](http://www.virtualchase.com/howto/assess_quality.html) (revised 13 February 2003).

#### **Tutorials and Other Websites:**

##### **The Virtual Chase: Evaluating the Quality of Information on the Internet**

<http://www.virtualchase.com/quality/index.html>

Defines five criteria for evaluating the quality of information appearing online or in print – scope of *coverage*, *authority*, *objectivity*, *accuracy* and *timeliness*. It also discusses hoaxes and other incidents of questionable, false or fraudulent information, provides examples of Websites that illustrate good or bad information, and suggests strategies that help you detect bad information. Includes checklists and resources for learning more. Revised 24 February 2006.

Publisher: Ballard Spahr Andrews & Ingersoll, LLP.

##### **General Website Evaluation Criteria**

<http://www.aallnet.org/committee/aelic/criteria.html>

Tailored sets of criteria for evaluating legal and government information at government websites, developed by members of the Access to Electronic Legal Information Committee. Includes "General Evaluation Criteria for All Web Sites Providing Legal Information" and four other criteria sets that provide evaluation criteria specific to Judicial, Legislative, Executive Branch, and Local Government websites. Also includes evaluation worksheets. Updated May 2005.

Publisher: American Association of Law Libraries. Access to Electronic Legal Information Committee.

##### **Evaluating Information Found on the Internet**

<http://www.library.jhu.edu/researchhelp/general/evaluating/>

Discusses criteria by which scholars in most fields evaluate print information, and shows how the same criteria can be used to assess information found on the Internet. © 1996 Elizabeth E. Kirk, last updated 6/5/2002.

Publisher: The Sheridan Libraries of The Johns Hopkins University Libraries.

##### **Using Primary Sources on the Web**

<http://www.lib.washington.edu/subject/History/RUSA/>

Brief guide designed to provide researchers with information to help them evaluate internet sources and the quality of primary materials found online. Revised 15 October 2003.

Publisher: Reference and User Service Association History Section of the ALA.