

Website Credibility

Lesson

Adapted from a lesson written by Steve Grasser, Amanda Clark and Elizabeth Hobbs

Determining the credibility of a website can be a difficult task. It is important for students to differentiate between websites that are trustworthy and those that may be misleading. This lesson examines ways to assess the credibility of websites.

Objectives:

Students will examine clues to the credibility of internet websites.

Materials: LCD projector

Student Guide to Website Credibility

Student Guide to Website Credibility(questions to ask)

Time: 30 - 40 minutes

Background

It is an important life-long skill for students to have the ability to distinguish between websites that are highly credible from those that are not. Some students have been told that .com websites are not credible because many of these websites are selling products. Although some .com websites might be biased (toward the products they are selling), they may still be sites containing credible information about those products. Further, some .com websites, such as www.mayoclinic.com, are considered to be highly credible while displaying little bias (and selling no products). It is a complex task for students to negotiate the intricacies of the web.

Getting Started

Share with the students that there are no hard-fast rules about determining the credibility of websites. Although few if any websites are absolutely credible and free of bias, numerous clues can be found to help determine a degree of credibility.

Addressing the Topic

As a class demonstration, google ‘climate change’. Go to the epa.gov website and ask the class about any clues they notice which might indicate the site as a credible one. Record the responses on chart paper (include all including any that may *not* indicate a level of credibility such as ‘visually appealing’ or ‘use of technical terms’ - these will be addressed later).

If not mentioned, include:

- .gov website - a good indication of credibility
- an 'about this site' tab (same as 'about us') - describes who maintains the website. (Click that tab and examine what it says.)
- no advertisements (Note: Numerous websites considered to be credible *may* have advertising. However, ads must be separate from the website content.)
- live-links to an array of sections providing additional information
- 'contact us' tab - shows how to communicate with the organization
- high-profile government organization - EPA, the Environmental Protection Agency, is widely accepted as credible

Explain that the absence of one or more of these clues may not necessarily indicate a lack of credibility, but may raise some doubts about how trustworthy a website might be.

Next, go to globalwarminghysteria.com/home/. Look for similar clues about credibility (or lack thereof) by examining the list (underlined above).

Students may notice the following:

- not a .gov website (which does *not* necessarily indicate a lack of credibility - even though the site is a .com, it may still contain credible information)
- no 'about us' or 'about this site' tab (a serious challenge in determining credibility)
- the site is traced to an individual (Peter Glover) whose science expertise cannot be verified (if time, try a google search for Peter Glover)

Then, examine the website lickglobalwarming.org for credibility clues. Ask students about the .org designation - does it mean the site is a credible source? Look for other credibility clues. Have students vote either 'yes - likely to be credible' or 'no - questionable credibility'. Then, have students convince one another to change votes.

Keep chart paper posted for use by students. Challenge them to delete or add other credibility clues (or indicators of a lack of credibility) as they are discovered. Eventually the bogus indicators will be deleted.)

Distribute *Student Guide to Website Credibility* 20100706 and discuss ways to determine website credibility. Also distribute 20100723 which is an alternate guide for students in assessing website credibility. Discuss the merits of each.

Follow-up

- Look at the list of credibility clues recorded on the chart paper. Challenge the students to find websites of questionable credibility even if they are ‘visually appealing’ or ‘use technical terms’, or any other clues that may not actually indicate a degree of credibility.
- Challenge students to find websites that are *not* credible. Ask them to share these sites with the class and examine reasons the sites may be of questionable credibility.

A Student Guide to . . .

WEBSITE CREDIBILITY

Determining the credibility of websites can be a difficult challenge. There are no hard-fast rules to follow. Although few if any websites are absolutely credible and free of bias, numerous clues can be found to help determine a degree of credibility.

*Clues that indicate a **high likelihood** of credibility include . . .*

- ~ websites that are .gov
- ~ websites that are .edu

Examples of highly credible websites:

www.noaa.gov
www.epa.gov
www.mcdc2.missouri.edu

*Clues that are a **good indication** of credibility include . . .*

- ~ websites with an ‘about us’ or ‘about this site’ tab that leads to searchable experts or organizations who created the website
- ~ websites that are updated frequently - look for date of ‘last update’
- ~ those that are peer reviewed - look for ‘reviewed by’

*Clues that indicate **varying degrees** of credibility . . .*

- ~ websites that are .com
- ~ websites that are .org
- ~ websites that are .net

Many .com, .org, and .net websites are credible, but these designations are not necessarily indicators of consistent credibility and lack of bias.

Clues that indicate a lower degree of website credibility . . . the red flags!

- ~ no ‘about us’ or ‘about this site’ tab, or an ‘about us’ tab that is a dead link
- ~ mystery ‘experts’ not found or identified elsewhere *or* only found at other questionable websites
- ~ organization is fictitious, misleading, or not found elsewhere
- ~ high number of dead links *or* all links go to same website
- ~ product advertisements disguised as news

Examples of low credibility websites:

www.expertmedjournal.com/#
www.usmedicaljournal.com
www.channel6reports.com/health/
www.newyorkchronicle.org/

Keep in mind:

- * Credibility depends upon the information being searched - information *about* an organization or individual may be quite credible at their website, yet there may be a degree of bias.
- * Be wary of websites that speak in absolutes . . . ‘the best’, ‘the worst’, ‘the only’, ‘everything you need to know about . . .’
- * A website’s credibility is enhanced if multiple sources are in agreement.
- * There are degrees of credibility - credibility is more than a yes/no designation.
- * Although misspelled words are not necessarily an indication of limited credibility, their presence should raise concerns.
- * Professional appearance is *not* an indication of credibility!
- * Utilize numerous indicators (as described above) before determining an overall credibility of a website.

Use common sense when evaluating the credibility of websites - it is easy to be fooled!

A Student Guide to . . .

WEBSITE CREDIBILITY

Determining the credibility of a website can be a difficult challenge. There are no hard-fast rules to follow, and the credibility of a website depends upon how you plan on using the information you find there.

Although few if any websites are absolutely credible and free of bias, there are numerous questions you can ask yourself to help determine your own level of trust.

- Is this a website for an individual or organization with which I am familiar?
If not, am I able to find the individual or organization elsewhere on the internet with supporting evidence of credibility?
- Do I trust the expertise of this individual or organization?
- Does the website contain an ‘about us’ or an ‘about this site’ tab?
Does that tab link to a description of the individual or organization that I trust?
- Am I able to find information on other websites that compares favorably with the information on this site?
- Is this website ‘peer reviewed’ or ‘editorially reviewed’? In other words, has the information on this website been checked for accuracy?
Is there a mention of ‘reviewed by’, or something similar?
If so, who has reviewed the website? Do I trust their credentials?
- What seems to be the purpose of the website - to inform, to sell a product, to persuade, to mislead, to entertain - or a combination of purposes?
- Does the website speak in absolutes: ‘the best’, ‘the worst’, ‘the only’, ‘everything you need to know about . . .’?
- Is this website updated frequently?
Is there a mention of ‘last update’? Is it recent?
- Does the professional appearance of the website matter to me?
Should it?
- Are there numerous misspelled words on the website?
Does that matter to me?
Should it?
- If I decide to lean toward trusting this website, have I made that decision based upon numerous clues about credibility?



*Remember to be careful when evaluating the credibility of websites -
it can be easy to be fooled!*