

The Five Ws of Cyberspace

The old formula used by police, journalists, and researchers – Who, What, When, Where, Why, and How – can be applied in cyberspace to help identify credible online information sources.

KNOWING WHAT'S WHAT AND WHAT'S NOT
THE 5 W'S (AND 1 H) OF CYBERSPACE

Ask yourself:



WHO is the source of the information?

- Has someone taken responsibility for the content of this website?
- Is information about the author or organization clearly stated?
- Are there any links to in-depth information about the author or organization?
- Can you contact the company or author through a real world postal address or phone number?
- Can you confirm that the company or author is a credible authoritative source of information?
- Can you verify the authority of any of the site's content that is attributed to other sources?
- Is the information biased in any way?
- Does the site rely on loaded language or broad unsubstantiated statements?



WHAT are you getting?

- Is emotion used as a means of persuasion?
- Does the site offer more than one viewpoint?
- Are there links to other or alternative viewpoints?
- Does the site's information seem thorough and well organized?
- Does the site clearly state the topics it intends to address?
- Does it follow through on the information it has promised?
- Does the information seem complete and consistent?
- Is the information well written and easy to understand?
- Does the site offer a list of further in-depth resources or links to such resources?
- What is the copyright status of material found on the site?





WHEN was the site created?

- Is it important that the information you're looking for be absolutely current?
- Is a reference date provided to show when the material was put online or when it was last updated?
- Do the links work?



WHERE are you?

Learn to deconstruct a Uniform Resource Locator (better known as a URL, or "site address"). Let's use the MediaSmarts URL as an example:

<http://www.mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/licensed-resources>

<http://www>.

The "http" notation indicates that this is a hypertext document (as most online documents are). The "www" is short form for "World Wide Web," where all websites reside.

[mediasmarts.ca](http://www.mediasmarts.ca)

The second part of a URL contains the domain name of the person or organization hosting the website – in this case, mediasmarts. The ".ca" which follows indicates that the site is hosted by a Canadian organization.

[teacher-resources/licensed-resources](http://www.mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/licensed-resources)

The last section maps out the pathway of directories and sub-directories leading to the page you are on. For this particular page on the MediaSmarts site, "teacher-resources" indicates that you are in the section of the site that holds resources for teachers. The final URL entry ("licensed-resources") indicates the name of the page or document you have arrived at.

~ Sometimes you might see a "user" reference or tilde (~) symbol in a sub-directory, followed by a name. This indicates that you may be on a personal Web page that is hosted by an ISP (Internet Service Provider).



The type of organization behind a website can give some clues to its credibility.

- .gov** In the U.S., .gov applies to federal departments. In Canada, provincial governments use .gov followed by a provincial or territorial abbreviation and .ca.
- .gc** The federal government in Canada uses .gc in its domain name and in the domain names of many of its departments, such as Industry Canada and Canadian Heritage. However, some government websites, such as the Canadian Human Rights Commission (www.chrc-ccdp.ca), opt for just .ca.
- .ca** The Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA) is the non-profit corporation responsible for overseeing and keeping a registry of the “.ca” Internet country code domain for Canada. Schools, educational organizations, libraries, museums, and some government departments may be registered under a 2-digit country-of-origin code, such as .ca, .uk or .au. However, it's important to remember that any Canadian organization can obtain a .ca domain.
- .edu** The U.S. originally created .edu to indicate American colleges and universities offering 4-year degree programs. Most Canadian universities tend to use .ca.

.org **.com** **.net**

Back in the early days of the Web, *.org* indicated a wide assortment of groups, including non-profit organizations; *.com* indicated commercial organizations; and *.net* was intended for organizations directly involved in Internet operations, such as Internet service providers.

Now, anyone can apply for and use these letters in their domain names. For example, the YWCA website in Oakville ends with *.com*, in Vancouver, it ends with *.org*; and in Montreal it ends with *.ca*.



WHY are you here?

Before you saddle up and ride out into cyberspace, it's a good idea to stop and consider whether or not the Internet is even the best place to go. Ask yourself:

- Can I get the information faster offline?
- Does the online material I'm finding suit my needs?



HOW can you tell what's what?

- When in doubt, doubt. Scepticism should be the rule of thumb on the Internet.



- Apply the *Five Ws* of cyberspace to the websites you visit.
- Double-check your facts and sources – and then check them some more!
- Use Meta-Web information searches to assess the credibility of websites. This can be done by entering the author's name into a search engine to conduct a quick background check. Or you can find which sites link to a specific site by going to a search engine and entering a "link:" command in the "Search" box, followed by the page's URL.

