Engineering Communication - Proper Use of References

Jan Comfort, Clemson University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/jan_comfort/16/
Evaluating the Quality of Information found on the Internet

You already know the ABC’s of evaluating information, right?

**Authority**  Is it clear who is responsible for the site? What are the author’s credentials? Is he or she an expert in the field? Is it a .com or .gov or .edu site?

**Bias**  What is the purpose of the article? Is it free of obvious bias? Is the author presenting an objective view of the subject matter?

**Currency**  When was the information created or last updated?

But there’s more to evaluating resources than that. Good students take it to the next level and:

- **Use sources that have been reviewed by experts**

Instead of searching for hours trying to find websites that meet stringent requirements, try using library sources to identify good quality sources that have already been through a review process.

  **Peer review:** a process by which something proposed (as for research or publication) is evaluated by experts in the appropriate field.¹

Academic Search Premier and Expanded Academic ASAP are the names of two very good multi-subject databases that contain scholarly (peer reviewed) as well as popular articles. One or both of them should be available at your library.

- **Compare the information found in your article or website with content from other websites, or from reviewed sources**

Comparing sources can also alert you to controversial information or bias that will need further study. Are facts from one website the same as those of another? How about depth of coverage? Maybe one site has better quality information. Does the site have photos or other unique features that make it a good choice? Or perhaps a journal article from a library database is a better source. Until you compare several sources, you won’t know what you’re missing!

- **Corroborate the information**

  **Corroborate:** To strengthen or support with other evidence; make more certain.²

Verify the facts from your source – regardless of where you found it – against one or more different sources. Don’t take the word of one person/organization. A simple rule might be, “do not use information unless you have corroborated it. Corroboration with varied and reviewed sources increases the probability of success.”³
Sources:
