Researching Effectively – Becoming a Critical User of the Internet

In using this document you will be able to learn how to make sure the information you are taking from the internet can be checked against the following criteria: Validity ? Reliability ? and Bias?

> **Valid – Is it True? Is it up to date?**
> **Reliable – Can I trust the content?**
> **Bias – Is it subjective? One person's opinion without offering an alternative view?**

Before You Start Your Research :

Think of the topic you have to research and list some key terms that you can use in the search engine to search the internet e.g.
If I was asked to undertake some research about the character Piggy in Lord of the Flies I might choose the following as possible research criteria:

- **Lord of The Flies**
- **William Golding**
- **Piggy + Lord of The Flies**

You should also become comfortable working with Boolean Searches '**AND', 'OR', 'NOT'** and working with other advanced searches. To explore a listing of some of these please go here: **http://www.google.com/intl/en/help/refinesearch.html**

Questions to ask of all websites you visit for information.

5w's and 1h - We should ask ourselves these six questions:

- **Who has written this website?**
- **What is it about? Is it factual? What do you know by reading the URL?**
- **When was the site last updated? Is it recent enough to be valid?**
- **Where does this information come from? Where does this site link to?**
- **Why will this information be useful? Why has the author written this?**
- **How good is the Information?**

How do we check the information on the website?

Use the following tips to ensure you are accessing trusted, valid, reliable and unbiased information. Let's take each of the questions above in turn and see how we can find the answers we are looking for.

ф Who has written this website?

This is an easy one to answer. Log on to this site : **http://www.easywhois.com** and enter the domain name of the site you have decided to access. If you then scroll down through the information, you will find the name of the person or organisation that has registered the site.
As another check, take the Registrant Name and perform a search for it in a Search Engine. Find out about the person or organisation that wrote the site content.

ф What is it about? Is it factual? What do you know by reading the URL?

Take a close look at the URL to get more information about the site. Three questions you should be asking yourself are these:

- o **Do you recognise the domain name?**
- o **What is the extension in the domain name?**
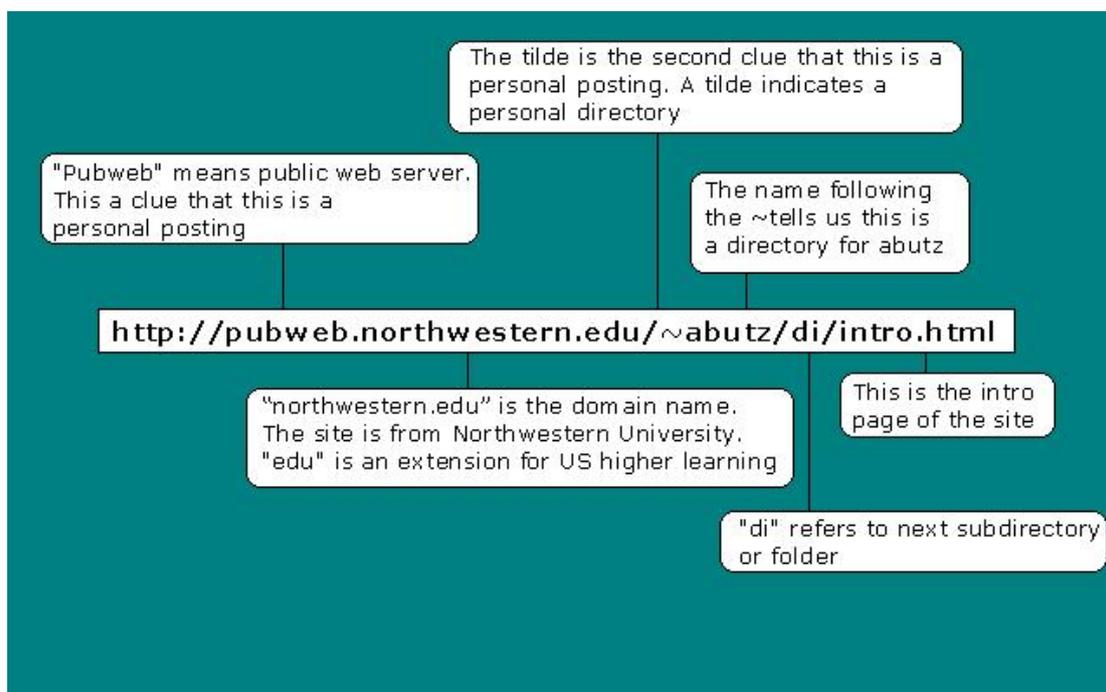- o **Are you on a personal page?**

Before answering these questions lets look at the breakdown of the following URL to get the general idea.

http://www.upandaway.com/balloons/hotair.html

- ➤ **http://** - Short for Hypertext Transfer Protocol, this indicates a hypertext document or directory
- ➤ **www.** - This indicates a page on the World Wide Web. (Sometimes the "www" is not used)
- ➤ **upandaway.com/** - Called the domain name, it often tells you the name of a company, university or organisation. It can also tell you the country of origin
- ➤ **www.upandaway.com/** - Together, these indicate the web server name
- ➤ **balloons/** - This is a directory or folder on the web server that contains a group of related web pages within the website
- ➤ **hotair.html** - This is a web page inside the folder. (The same file can also be named hotair.html).

If you break down the information listed above, it should give you a better idea of how trustworthy the site actually is. For a full listing of extensions in domain names link here: **http://www.computeruser.com/resources/dictionary/domains.html**

Now let's look at a URL that should send out warning signals

ɸ **When was the site last updated? Is it recent enough to be valid?**

To answer this question we again look at the information generated on **www.easywhois.com** . This will give us the date the website was created and also the date when it was last updated.

ɸ **Where does this information come from? Where does this site link to?**

This is a very important question to answer and again, it is quite easy to find the answer. To find the external links, conduct this search in Alta Vista with the link: command. Go to Alta Vista **www.altavista.com** type **link:** in the search box and then add the URL of the site you would like research.
Note: If you are researching a URL and produce 0 results, try truncating the URL you are researching. Truncating can also help if the URL you are researching is long. To truncate, delete one folder at a time, moving from right to left. Each time delete to the previous left slash /.

Having found where a site links from and how, validate the site by asking these 3 questions:

o **Who is linked to the web site? Look to see what other groups or individuals have linked to the site. Are they universities, schools or**

> commercial sites? Read the URLs and titles of external links carefully. Look to see if there is a pattern in the types of sites linked.

> o **What is the purpose of the link? Why have groups or individuals chosen to link to this site? Web authors choose to link to other sites for specific purposes. Speculate on what those purposes might be.**

> o **What do other sites say about the information on the site? Gain perspective about a web site by reading what another site tells you about it.   Cross-reference information and look for hidden bias.**

ɸ **Why will this information be useful? Why has the author written this?**

Having completed all the steps noted above, you should be able to make your own judgments as to why the information has been written by the author and more importantly, how appropriate the information will be to help with your research and answer the questions you set out to answer.

ɸ **How good is the Information?**

This part of your research comes down to personal judgment. However, no matter how good you think the information is, to copy and paste from a site will do you no favours. Take the key content from the site and write it in your own words. This not only helps you remember the information but also allows you to word it using language that will be clearly understood by the intended reader. It will also avoid an embarrassing situation of being caught plagiarising another's work.

Finally, if you want to be sure that you are accessing the best information available on the internet, use other search engines and check other sites to compare the information content using the above tips.

Having completed all this, you should be able to judge for yourself just how good the information is that you have researched.

For fuller information on this topic including other tips and tricks when researching, please access Alan November's website using the following URL:
http://www.novemberlearning.com/Default.aspx?tabid=160