The web is an important source of information for students. You may find that you are encouraged, or even required, to use the internet to prepare for a tutorial, to research for an essay or other assignment, or to follow current debates or developments in your academic disciplines and to communicate with others. However, in many ways the internet is different to the traditional print-based or other sources you may be familiar with. This handout aims to help you evaluate and cite (refer to) information you find on the internet.

Evaluating what you find

Much of your use of the internet will be through accessing websites. However, as you become more accustomed to the web you will realise that not all sites are of equal quality or value. While there is a great deal of information, and it can be accessed very quickly, much of it has not been through the traditional reviewing processes in place for print sources. This means that as well as the numerous informative and valuable web sites, there is also a lot of junk out there.

Remember that most of the time you will use information from the web to analyse an issue or as evidence for an argument in response to a topic or question, and so just as in your use of traditional print sources, you need to be selective and identify those sources which are of most value. The following are a few questions and points that you might like to keep in mind. Above all, don’t forget to draw upon the critical research skills that you have already developed and regularly use.

- What is the purpose of the website and who is its intended audience? Are these made clear? How does the author’s purpose relate to your own?
- What does the site contain? How comprehensive is it? Is there enough information? Is there too much information? How will the site complement other sources you are using?
- How up-to-date is the site? When was the site created? When was the last time it was updated and how often is it updated?
- Who is the author of the site? Is it an individual, organisation or institution that has some credibility and authority? If so, how is this demonstrated? For example, do you know something of the author’s background, and is the author well-known or referred to by others?
- How available is the site? How likely is it that the site will be traceable, at least in some form, in the future (in a week? a month? a year? longer?)? For example, is the site ‘published’ as an electronic book or journal, or affiliated to a major organisation or institution?
- What particular benefit does the site offer? How does the content compare to that of other websites, or to related print-based or other sources? How confident are you that the content is accurate and reliable? Is there equivalent or better information readily obtainable from more stable and verifiable sources?
- Is the site presented so that the content is easily accessible? This is important because your reader may wish to follow up any sources you have used. Is the site well organised and easy to use? Do the links work well, ie is it easy to find your way to/from and around the site? How well integrated is the written text with graphical and other information (images, layout, colour, video, sound etc)?
Citing (referring to) what you find

There are now many conventions for citing print-based and other sources in your writing, but you may be unsure how to cite information you have gathered from the internet, most commonly websites, email messages, and contributions to discussion lists and newsgroups. Already there are numerous ‘How to’ guides available, mostly websites, and many of these claim to be specific to an academic field, or to have the endorsement of an association or professional body. However, some of these guides may only reflect the special interests of the author or institution and so they should be used with caution.

Your first source of guidance for citing (referring to) information from the web is always your course lecturer, or your Department or Faculty. If you cannot get such guidance, you could use this handout. It offers a simple and clear way to cite just some of the many possible types of information. If you find that you need more specific or detailed guidance, you could consult one of the sources listed on the last page of this handout under the heading ‘More information’.

Sites on the web

Many of the details for sites on the web are similar to those of familiar print-based sources, and so citing them is not too different.

Within the body of your text (essay, report, sub-thesis etc) you could follow the usual conventions of your academic subject area. This usually means either footnoting or using the author/date (Harvard) system. The major difference with internet information is that instead of, or maybe in addition to, indicating a date of publication, often you will give the date you accessed (or read or visited) the site.

In your bibliography or references list, when possible you need to indicate at least the following points, which are illustrated in some examples below:

- the author’s surname and first name or initial, and/or the name of the relevant organisation or institution
- the title of the site (and of the ‘host’ website, if there is one and it is different)
- the full address (location) of the site (written on its own separate line)
- if possible, the page number(s) or other marker(s) identifying the section of the site
- when the site was last updated (or modified, or revised), if this is shown
- and very importantly, the date on which you accessed (or read or visited) the site.

This last point is vital because information on the web has the potential to change quickly and frequently. Make sure you write the address accurately by following punctuation and formatting exactly. For example, don’t use capitals if the web address has lower case letters, and don’t put a full-stop at the end unless the address actually has one.

Here are some examples of websites:


Email

Email is a form of written electronic personal communication. Traditionally, personal communication is not included
in a bibliography or references list because it is not something which can be easily followed up and/or verified by the reader, and for this reason too you should be cautious in using it. Some publication style manuals recommend making reference to email messages only in the body of the text, where the convention is to give the name of the person and the date of communication, using either brackets or a footnote (depending on your subject area). For example:

S. Hardy (email, 20 January 1997) has described football as a form of religion.

OR, if the recipient of the message is someone other than you,

S. Hardy (email to L. Wilkes, 20 January 1997) has described football as a form of religion.

Email is more easily accessible to a reader if it is stored in an electronic archive. If you are citing email in an archive you should give the details of the archive (ie the title, address etc) and when you accessed it. You should not provide another person’s email address because this could infringe upon their possible wish for privacy. An exception could be when they have themselves made it public, for example in a contribution to a discussion list (see below).

**Discussion lists, newsgroups, bulletin boards etc**

These electronic sources involve the distribution of messages to people who have specifically ‘subscribed’ to (joined) a list or group because they share some common interest, for example being members of the same academic discipline, or special interest area within a discipline. Information from these sources usually has an identifiable author and date, and the name of the list/group can be used much like a journal or book title. Such information is necessarily more public (and so published) than a personal email message and so it is more easily followed up and verified. Like email, messages may also be archived. In the body of your text you should follow the conventions of your subject area and either use a footnote with full details, or brackets to show the author and date of the message. In the bibliography or references list you should indicate the name of the author (the sender of the message), the date of the message, the subject (title) of the message, the name of the discussion list (newsgroup etc), the internet address of the list/group, and the date you accessed it. If possible, you could also indicate the convenor or editor of the list/group.

Here are two examples:


If you are citing a full discussion, and not just a single message, you could give the details of the discussion group, the relevant dates, and write discussion and the subject of the discussion (as in the example immediately above).

**A final word**

If you are ever in any doubt about what details to include, remember why you are providing information about a source in the first place. This might help you to know what to include. As a rule of thumb, you must give enough detail to enable your reader to clearly identify your source and, where relevant and possible, to be able to find it. The details you give must be accurate, clear and consistent.