Tips for Finding the Answers to the WWWs

WHO

If an author is named, look for a link on the Web page to find information about him or her. Sometimes, an author’s name is highlighted and linked to another page where a biography can be found.

Other times, information about the author may appear at the end of an article. Be sure to check there, too, even if that means clicking to the final page for sources that span multiple pages.

Sometimes there is no available information about an author. If that is the case, do a key word search in your favorite search engine to find out any facts about him or her.

When evaluating an author’s background, ask yourself whether this person is qualified to write about the subject. If you are in doubt, do not trust his or her information. Usually, an author of high-quality information has an outstanding academic and professional background that is relevant to the subject. For example, the writer of a sociology article might have a master’s degree or a doctorate in the field and teach at a university or a college.

If a source does not have a named author, you should be suspicious; however, the article is not automatically unacceptable. Sometimes information is posted on a credible Web site, such as that of the Mayo Clinic, without a named author because the site’s organization is considered the author. An employee of the organization usually composes this type of article without receiving credit.

WHAT

Look carefully at the Web site that the article appears on. Is it for an organization that you recognize, such as Time magazine, the American Heart Association, or Purdue University? If not, you should start looking for further information. Be wary of content mills, Web sites that provide a platform for anyone to be published for no or very little money. These sites typically reflect poor publication standards and feature highly questionable information.

On many Web sites, there is a link to information about the organization. It may be called “About This Site,” “History of the Organization,” “What Is This Site?” “Company Overview,” or something similar. You should be leery if no information can be found.

While reading about the organization, pay particular attention to how submissions are accepted. If it appears that anyone can fill out a form and become a contributor, the site’s standards are very low compared to magazines and journals.
Look, too, for whether the site has any sponsors. For example, if a health care lobbying group sponsors a page, you should be aware that its information about health care issues might be biased. Similarly, if facts about a new medical treatment for skin cancer are posted on a dermatologist’s Web site, the information could be one-sided.

**WHEN**

To determine whether the site is current, look for when the page was last updated. You might also look for a copyright symbol with a year beside it.

Bear in mind that not all subjects require up-to-date information. For example, if you are working on a project for a nursing class, you will likely need recently published material to keep up with trends and discoveries in the field. If you are writing on Shakespeare, however, information that was published fifty years ago might still be worthwhile today.

To verify the accuracy of information on a Web site, you should cross check facts, which involves reviewing other sources to make sure that the information is consistently conveyed. Look carefully at details, not just main ideas; the former are what often differ among problematic sources. For example, two sites might report that the World Trade Center towers were attacked and destroyed on September 11, 2001, but they may differ in their accounts of the reasons and the long-term effects.