This is a tutorial from the librarians at Lone Star College – North Harris. The purpose of this tutorial is to teach users how to evaluate information found on the Internet.

In a previous video in this series, you learned about the importance of being skeptical about the information that you read and see. Not every piece of information that you encounter will be accurate. The four principles taught in that previous video are still useful. Ask yourself about the authority of a source: does this person have any idea what he or she is talking about? Ask yourself about the currency of a source: is this information up-to-date? Ask yourself about the objectivity of a source: does this author or publication have a bias? Ask yourself about the verifiability of a source: can you fact-check a claim and verify that it is either true or false? Now we’re going to apply these principles to the Internet.

The good news about the Internet is that anyone can publish anything on it. The bad news about the Internet is that anyone can publish anything on it. A webpage about any given topic might be written by an expert in the field, or it might be written by someone who has no idea what he or she is talking about. When examining a webpage, ask yourself “What is the name of the author of this page?” The author of a page might be a person, a corporation, a government agency, or an organization. Holding a particular person accountable for the content of a page is a safeguard against misinformation, so you should prefer sites that are authored by a named person. Then ask yourself “Is this person or organization qualified to write on the subject?” For example, if you’re looking at medical information, is the author a doctor or a medical organization? Remember that anyone can write anything on the Internet, even if they have no background or experience in the field.

This is why open source websites such as wikis should be not be used as information sources. There is no fixed author for a given wiki page, so anyone can write anything.

Next, ask yourself if the information on a webpage is current. Many webpages will list a date when the page was first published, and possibly a date when the page was last updated. That’s very important, especially when the content addresses any subject which changes rapidly, such as science or technology. If a webpage lists a very old date, or doesn’t provide a date at all, you may wish to disregard the site as an information source.

You should also look for any signs of bias by the website authors. Ask yourself “Does this website have an agenda or a bias?” For example, let’s say that you’re researching safety
issues related to widgets. Are they safe to have around the house? Are they known to suddenly burst into flames or leak toxic chemicals? The website for the National Widget Producers Association may provide lots of information about widget safety issues. But as an advocacy group for the widget industry, it’s unlikely that the website would emphasize how dangerous widgets can be. So the website would demonstrate a pro-widget bias.

Everyone has an opinion, and the Internet is a great place to express those opinions. Website authors might be subtle or explicit about those opinions, but they have them, and you should be on the lookout for the bias of any given webpage.

Next, ask yourself “Can I verify that this information is correct?” When you’re using a source in print on paper, you may get a bibliography of sources. A website can do this, too. But websites can also hyperlink directly to sources, allowing you to instantly check that another information source was correctly quoted or cited – provided that the source material is also online.

Even though the Internet allows people to publish inaccurate information, it also increases the ability of readers to verify the information that they read. Just like in a book, make sure that the factual claims made by a website can be verified. Is there a list of sources? Can you check them? You may not be able to verify everything that a website tells you, you should prefer information that can be verified.

As we advised you in a previous video, be skeptical of any information that you encounter – especially on the Internet. When considering using a webpage as an information source, as yourself “Is there a named author responsible for the content of this page? What are the author’s qualifications? Is the information on the page current? Does the author or hosting organization have a bias? Can I verify that the information is accurate?”

Keep these principles in mind, and you’ll be a savvier, smarter Internet user. Now take this short quiz about the content of this video.