Chapter 8

Evaluating Results

When you use Google to find information, you clearly don't want just any information. What you want is credible, timely, reliable information. In other words, information quality is important. Google can help you find the quality information you need. Do remember, though, that evaluation of sources is an art and that there is no magic test. You'll have to put together several clues and make your best judgment.

8.1 Finding Quality on the Results Page

Before you click through to look at a page from your search results, you can do a little screening of those results to separate those pages more likely to be better than other pages.

Site and URL. Information from a government site (.gov in the URL) represents the official word of that government agency. The agency itself is often identified either in the page title or the URL itself. If, for example, you enter the search query *ocean depth*, you'll find a few pages with noaa.gov as part of the URL, indicating that they are from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration of the U. S. federal government. This information should be reliable. Information from corporations (.com) that are well known and whose business is connected with the subject of your search should be reliable as well. The top-level domains for organizations (.org) and educational institutions (.edu) can indicate possible quality, although it can vary widely. Anyone can use the .org domain and claim to be an organization. And students as well as faculty can post pages on many .edu sites, in addition to the institution's official postings.

As another example, if you enter the search query *anti graffiti paint*, you'll find in the results an industry organization (The National Paint and Coatings Association), a paint manufacturer (Penco Products), and several government agencies. Selecting these types of sources from among your results, based on their page title and URL, is a handy way to increase the efficiency of your search for quality information.

Tip 8.1 Book Reviews

Metainformation (information about information) is a helpful tool to aid in your evaluation of an information source. Particularly handy are book reviews. To locate a book review using Google, try entering the author's last name, a keyword from the book title, and the word review. For example, *Rowling phoenix review* will locate several re-

views of J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter book, *The Order of the Phoenix*. Experiment a little, and try some of these terms to find what you want:

- review
- summary
- evaluation
- criticism
- overview

Ranking. The pages near the beginning of your results list are put there based on their popularity, in connection with their correspondence to your search terms. Popularity does indicate a degree of interest on the part of other sites, and probably a degree of importance also. In other words, it is a very general indicator of perceived quality. However, do remember that the most scholarly articles and the most technical presentations are unlikely to be ranked very high, simply because they will not be linked by as many sites. This is one reason you should look well down the results list (to 100 or 200) to make sure you find the high scholarship but low link results.

Snippets. Sometimes the snippets will enable you to rule out a site, if there are grammatical or spelling errors, if the language appears angry or intemperate, or if the content seems completely on the wrong subject.

Tip 8.2 Click to the Directory

We'll discuss the Google Directory more in the next chapter, but for now you might note that you can use the Directory's description of a site as part of your evaluation. Just click on the Directory tab of your results page and Google will take your search query to the Directory. Each entry contains a summary description, sometimes with an indication of the value of the site. These descriptions can help you decide which pages to view.

8.2 Examining the Source for Quality

Visiting the pages in your results will tell you much about their quality, sometimes in just a glance.

Page sense. Does the page itself cover the topic well? Here are some indicators to look for:

- What are the author's credentials? If a person, what is the institutional affiliation? If an organization, does it appear to be credible? Does the source of the information seem to have the necessary expertise?

- Is the material up to date? Look for evidence of an appropriate date. Depending on your subject, you may need very recent material (business, technology) or you may be able to use material

of any date (art history, literature). Caution: Many pages automatically post today's date on them when you access them, so if you see today's date, be careful. The page itself may have been created some time ago.

• Is the treatment fair or biased? Look for as much objectivity and moderateness as possible. For political material, look for a clear indication of viewpoint. The slant is to be expected, as long as it is on the table and not conducted under a pretense of objectivity. How reasonable is the argument or presentation of information?

• Is there documentation or other support for claims made by the article? Named sources, works cited, a bibliography or relevant hyperlinks are indications of the credibility of the material.

Tip 8.3 Print Preview, Print Range Saves Paper

Printing out the information you are interested in is always a good idea because a printout allows you to annotate, highlight, and otherwise use the Web-based material. However, you may not want to print the entire Web page, especially if it is large. To determine how many printed pages the article will require, go to "File," "Print Preview" on the Internet Explorer or other browser menu. The status bar will tell you how many pages are needed to print the article. To see the pages individually in preview, click on the minus magnifying glass. You may discover that you do not need all the pages from the article. To print only a range, click on "Print," and type in the page range in the "Pages" box, as in "5–7" and just those pages will print.

Find in Page. Remember that you can zip right to the place(s) in the article where your search terms are mentioned by using the "Edit," "Find (on This Page)" toolbar function. Look at the surrounding context to see how your terms are being used.

Homepage. Visit the homepage of the article, either by choosing a "Home" link (if available) or by truncating the URL back to the homepage (the base URL, such as www.pesticideinfo.org). Examine this page to see what kind of site has mounted the page in question. Is the entire site devoted to your page's topic, or is the page relatively unrelated to the purpose of the site itself?

"About" information. Many homepages have an "About" link that takes you to a description of the company or organization sponsoring the site. Read this material to gain an insight into the site's operators. You can often make an estimate of credibility based on the purpose of the site.

Tip 8.4 Avoiding Plagiarism

If you decide to copy and paste parts of your result pages into a document (your research paper body or a file of quotations), be very careful to keep track of the difference between the copied words (which must be quoted) and your own words. You might want to

record copied material in a different font and use an indentation for longer sections. And be sure to use quotation marks for shorter passages. The best advice is that you copy and paste all quotations into a separate file and then copy and paste from there into your research paper. That way, if you ever get confused about some text—is it a quotation or your own words?—you can go back to the quotation file and double check. Many things happen to text during editing and you want to protect yourself from accidental plagiarism.

Always copy and paste the URL of the source right after each passage you copy and paste from a Web site, so that you will have the exact reference. It's a good idea to type in the complete citation information also, so that you need not return to the Web page later on to look up that information for your bibliography.

8.3 Looking Beyond the Source for Quality

What other pages say about a source can often be helpful in your evaluation. Here are some techniques for using external sites in your evaluation process.

Links. To learn both the nature and the number of other sites that link to a page you want to evaluate, use the Google *link* command. For example, a search for *Byzantine architecture* turns up a page at Princeton University. Copying that URL and pasting it into the Google search box as a link query (*link:www.princeton.edu/~asce/const_95/const.html*) shows that it is linked to several other educational sites.

Evaluations by others. Use the name of the organization, home page, or author of the article as a query in Google and see what others say. Is the site generally well respected? Caution: Other sites that agree with the site will obviously say that the site is wonderful, credible, and valuable. Pay attention to the credentials and credibility of those who praise or criticize the site. Don't simply accept what is said.

Corroboration. One of the best tests of reliability is to see what other sites support the knowledge claims made by the page in question. As you continue your research and read several articles related to your topic, you will develop a sense about what is commonly known or believed, what are controversial areas, and what are the arguments and evidence for each position. This circumspect view will give you a sense of where each source can be located among the viewpoints and along the continuum of information quality. The more widely you read, the more competent you will become at evaluating a given source.

Tip 8.5 Explore the Controversy

Many knowledge claims are the subject of controversy. As a good researcher, you want to locate arguments and information on all sides of controversial issues. Google can give you instant insight into (1) whether a subject is controversial and (2) what some of the issues of disagreement or conflict are. You may not always turn up

relevant pages, but this tip works surprisingly often, especially if you know there is a specific controversy in your subject area. Try some of these queries or model your own after them and see what you get:

- *adhd controversy OR controversial*

- *"treasure salvage" controversy OR controversial*

- *"Laguna Beach" "endangered species" controversy OR controversial*

8.4 Conclusion

When you look at the results pages, keep a critical eye on each one. Ask yourself, "Why should I accept what this source says?" Take an active interest in looking for signs of credibility (or signs of a lack of credibility). Remember that a fancy or professional-looking site is no guarantee of quality. All that means is that the site creator knew how to use Web design software. There is an enormous amount of excellent information on the Web, and an even more enormous amount of unreliable information. Just to calibrate your boloney detector, do a Google search on these terms and read around a bit:

- *urban legends*

- *hoaxes*

- *fraud*

- *scams*

Be a careful consumer of information.