

Researching online: 5 easy steps for college students.

OK, so you're a student in college and your professor has just given you an assignment to write a 5 page research paper on some topic like say, well you are in a psychology class and you get to choose your topic, how about depression. Fine. Your professor further states that you need to have at least seven good resources for your research paper. While you know you can go to the campus library and search through their computer database for journal articles and textbooks you also think about how easy it's going to be to go back to your dorm room or apartment and find some good sources online, right. Cool, that'll be easy. So you go back, fire up your computer and start your online search for information about depression for your paper. You open your browser and go to your favorite search engine, such as Google, yahoo or ask.com, type in the word depression and, yeah, look at that about 85 million websites. As you browse through your hits, you recall that your professor emphasized that you needed to find good websites for your research paper.

Good Website? You find yourself wondering what makes a website good for a research paper.

Well, when you visit a website there are 5 main things to look for. These things are: currency, authority, purpose, objectivity and writing style. Let's look at each of these individually. First of all check for a site's currency. This is whether the information has been kept up to date. You can often look at the bottom of the web page to see when the information was last modified. If the site hasn't been updated for some time then go ahead and skip that one. If you notice some dead links on the site this is another give away that this page hasn't been updated for a while.

The second element authority, has to do with the person or people who authored the site, their credentials, who their affiliated with and whether they have true authority to speak on the topic. You also want to look for a whether there is a way to contact the author as well as whether there is an accurate list of references for the information that's presented.

Third when you review a website for its purpose, you're trying to figure out whether it is commercial, informational, educational, persuasive, for entertainment, or even just a hoax. Not only does a careful look at content help you determine this but the URL or web address itself can help. The most trustworthy sites are ones with addresses that end in .gov or .edu. Ones that you have to be careful of are the .net, .org and yes, even the .coms.

The fourth thing you want to look at is the objectivity of the site; is the information biased, that is it presenting one side of the issue unfairly, is the author known to have a biased point of view, or is he or she associated with an organization with an agenda. Sometimes this is easy to spot while other times it's rather subtle. Also stay away from sites that have a lot of advertising, irrelevant clutter or junk on them. This could bring into question whether the sites main goal is to present information or to make money from its visitors.

And finally, check the site's writing style. Here you want to evaluate whether the information is presented clearly, legibly, and without errors. If there are errors in spelling or grammar or the information is just written poorly, then this is probably not a good resource to use for your paper.

Let's go back to that search you did on depression and look at some of the top hits you got. The top three are depression.com, the national institute of mental health and Wikipedia. Ah, Wikipedia. That site has become very popular as an online encyclopedia where entries are created and updated by people all over the world. Unfortunately, since this is the case, Wikipedia is actually not a good resource to use for a research paper. Anyone can change the information, introduce bias, and even put up information that is false. A classic example of false information in the form of a hoax occurred on March 14th, 2007 when it was reported in a Wikipedia article that Sinbad the comedian had died of a heart attack. He was actually very much alive and well.

Let's take a look at the first site, depression.com. The site is a .com, but the purpose of this site seems relevant to our topic. The site also appears current and the writing style is appropriate. The main problem however, in terms of using it as a resource for a research paper, has to do with its objectivity. This site is sponsored by Glaxo Smith Kline, a large pharmaceutical company that makes Welbutrim, one of the many drugs used to treat depression. However, when they talk about medication they don't mention other common drugs that are made by other companies. Clearly this site is not objective and its purpose is to promote its product.

The second website that came up on your search is from the National Institute of mental health. Right off the bat this site is looking good. It's a .gov and its purpose is to educate the public, its authoritative, cites its own resources, its objective, current, and written well. This is a very good resource for your research paper, go with it.

So as you review some of the websites to determine if they are good resources for your paper, how can you remember what to look for? Well, how about CAPOW! Currency, Authority, Purpose, Objectivity, and Writing Style. If you can remember that acronym you're good to go. Give your research paper that solid academic punch – CAPOW.

[Transcribed from the YouTube.com video *Research online for college students: five easy steps* by Prentiss Price-Evans]