EVALUATING WEB RESOURCES
USE THE SMELL TEST TO SEPARATE FACT FROM FICTION ONLINE


S stands for Source. Who is providing the information?

M is for Motivation. Why are they telling me this?

E represents Evidence. What evidence is provided for generalisations?

L is for Logic. Do the facts logically compel the conclusions?

L is for Left Out. What’s missing that might change our interpretation of the information?

Source

It’s essential to know who is providing the information. Legitimate information sources will always disclose who they are. On the web, they will have an “About Us” link to help you assess their independence and expertise.

Motivation

The source’s motivation matters because if the purpose is persuading rather than informing, we should be sceptical. Informers attribute every assertion of fact that’s not based on common knowledge or the author’s direct observation to a fully identified source. Informers practice fairness — dispassionately presenting all relevant sides to an issue in a context that aids audience understanding.
**Evidence**

Whenever we hear a new assertion about what’s real or true, we should ask: How do you know that? Trustworthy information providers should attempt to confirm or verify at least the most consequential or controversial claims of their sources. Try finding at least one other source, independent of the first, who provides a similar description of an event.

**Logic**

The fundamental question here is, does this make sense: externally — in light of everything else I know, and internally — is the evidence provided within the web resource adequate to support the conclusions reached?

**Left Out**

Omission and marginalization are among the most powerful and subtle means of introducing bias because we tend to notice only what’s emphasized. It’s helpful to look online for reports from alternative sources — especially those that differ by gender, generation, geography, race or class — that might present a different take on the same story.