

**Guidelines for Evaluating the Academic Quality of Internet Resources
for Authors and Developers of
Colorado State University Cooperative Extension¹
Web Sites
(May 2, 2002)**

Use these guidelines to evaluate and critique the academic quality and scholarly work of Internet sites that might be used as references, recommendations or links through Colorado State University Cooperative Extension (CSUCE) Web sites. These guidelines can help you decide to which sites to link. They can also help you develop your own Web site. Cooperative Extension's mission is to provide research-based information and effective educational programs. Extension's reputation is based on "knowledge you can trust," therefore CSUCE web sites should maintain academic quality and credibility. Links from Extension Web sites should be reviewed and critiqued periodically to keep links current and for academic quality and credibility.

Author's credentials and credibility:

- * Does the Web site explain the author's educational background, training, work experience and/or credentials as related to the subject matter? Does it link to the author's resume?
- * Does it provide the author's current title/position and organizational affiliation?
- * Does it explain any certification or licensure he or she might have in professional organizations? Does it link to the web sites of these groups, or provide addresses and telephone numbers that might attest to the author's credibility?
- * Does it have a link to the sponsoring entity's Web site, along with an address and telephone number to verify that the entity truly is who it says it is?

Content credibility and knowledge base:

- * Does the site provide information that is factual, accurate, exact, comprehensive and complete? Does it appear that critical information or facts are not omitted?
- * Does the site provide information based on scientific or scholarly research, and does it provide references to scientific sources? Generally, users can be more confident of information that includes research findings and conclusions, especially research that has been replicated.
- * Is it an authoritative and credible source—concerned with providing the truth? Does it supply good evidence that users can trust the information provided? Is the information objective, balanced, and unbiased? Consider carefully links to Web locations other than University or Education (.edu) or Government (.gov) sites. If you decide that a credible source or link is an organization (.org) or commercial vendor (.com), you should use a disclaimer or explanation that indicates why you believe the site is worthwhile or

¹ Written by the Colorado State University Cooperative Extension Web Quality Policy Committee—Del Benson, Dennis Child, Wendy Douglass, Robert Fetsch, and Ruth Willson. (Web Guidelines, Rev. 5.022)

indicates that it is the sole supplier, etc. Be cautious if the source is an organization with something or some agenda to “sell.” Standard “disclaimers” are listed on the Extension Web Standards page at <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/site/standards.html> . Consider using the following disclaimer. Notice: By activating this link, you will be leaving this Colorado State University Cooperative Extension Web site. Links are provided for educational purposes, consistent with the Cooperative Extension mission. We do not attest to the accuracy, objectivity or research base of the information provided, nor do we imply any endorsement of the information, products or services you may find there.

* Does the information avoid the appearance of conflicts of interest? Does it provide opposing views as appropriate? Does it avoid making dramatic claims? The stronger the claims, the more skepticism can be expected from the audience, especially with information that conflicts with common knowledge and wisdom. It should provide at least two unrelated sources that support the findings or confirm the information. It may present new information that may be true, but the information should be supported by strong evidence from highly credible sources. It should not sound “too good to be true.”

* Are complex issues (such as violence, growth, food safety, environment, or biosecurity) presented with more than simple solutions? The information provided should not guarantee simple solutions to difficult problems. Answering complicated questions or discussing complicated problems or issues requires many different strategies and possibilities.

* Is the information up-to-date, timely, and maintained? Does the site indicate how recently the page has been revised or updated? Resource links should be checked regularly to be sure they work.

* Does the site content/text have proper grammar and spelling? Does it appear to be clear and well organized? Is related material connected in an easily understandable way?

* Does it follow appropriate protocol and Web standards for use of copyrighted materials—including text, logos, images, photographs, drawings, video or audio clips, and other web resources? (Cf. <http://lib.colostate.edu/reserve/cprt2.html> <http://www.lib.uconn.edu/LILT/htmls/fairuse.html> <http://fairuse.stanford.edu/>)

Web site’s relevance to users and accessibility to audience:

* Is the Web site written for a specific audience? Does it fit with the purpose of your link? If the Web site has more than one set of target users, consider linking directly to the information that is most appropriate to your audience.

* How relevant is the information or knowledge to a user’s situation? Consider whether it provides examples that are as relevant as possible.

* Does the Web site consider audience limitations? Does it mention that the information may not apply to everyone because of demographic differences, educational skill levels or geographic or climate characteristics? Again, sites that acknowledge limitations are generally more credible than those claiming to provide the right answer for all circumstances or for all audiences.

- * Is the site readable and easy to use? How easily can users find what they want? Does it provide user instructions or help guides?
- * Does the site consider various audiences' accessibility, e.g. download time (some users pay for access by the minute), consistency in different browsers and hardware, and accessibility by special-need users, e.g. the visually impaired, limited English speaking, etc.? (Cf. <http://www.colostate.edu/Depts/ATRC/Resources.htm>)
- * Does it provide an accessible contact for questions and feedback through an address or e-mail link?
- * Does the Web site have its own search capabilities? Or can standard search engines search it?

References:

Colorado Internet Masters Curriculum Introduction, "Evaluating Information Resources on the World Wide Web from Conducting Internet Research 1," Curt Robbins, Author (1998). (Available to Colorado Internet Masters Course participants.) (Cf. <http://internetmasters.org>)

Colorado Internet Masters Curriculum, Session 3, "Browsers and Evaluating the Information You Find on the WWW." Laughlin, D., Knop, S., and Willson, R.(2002). Colorado Internet Masters Program Course Curriculum (2nd ed.). Colorado State University Cooperative Extension.

Colorado Internet Masters Curriculum, Session 8, "Developing Web Pages." (Available to Colorado Internet Masters Course participants.) Laughlin, D., Knop, S., and Willson, R.(2002). Colorado Internet Masters Program Course Curriculum (2nd ed.). Colorado State University Cooperative Extension.

CSU Cooperative Extension Web Page Standards, 12/7/2001. (Available from <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/site/standards.html>)

Fetsch, R.J., & Hughes, R. Jr., "Evaluating Family Life Web Sites," Colorado State University Cooperative Extension Fact Sheet 10.253, 5/2/2001. (Available from <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/consumer/10253.html>)

Hughes, R., Jr. (1997). *Web site review form*. Columbus: Ohio State University, Department of Human Development and Family Life.

Land Grant Training Alliance Web Site: <http://www.lgta.org/accessibility/>.

University of Waterloo Library Guide No. 1.2, "Evaluating What You Have Found-- Information on the World Wide Web." (Cf. <http://library.uwaterloo.ca/libguides/1-2.html>)

Web Standards and Content Guidelines for Official Colorado State University Pages,
2/1/2002. (Cf. <http://webdev.colostate.edu/>)