INTERNET RESEARCH

The internet is a wonderful repository of knowledge; however, with all the knowledge comes all the sham (frauds/hoaxes) and misleading commentary/facts.

Here are a few things to remember when searching for sources:
Internet Sources are not always reliable.
Internet Sources are not always peer-reviewed (reviewed by other subject-matter experts in the field) or peer-edited (edited by another scholar, writer, or expert).
Internet Sources may be intentionally misleading (they may show conflicting information without regard to the user or purpose).
Internet Sources may be bias, exclusionary, and even malicious.
Internet Sources may contain plagiarized information, which after time may not be correct at all.

Below are a few guidelines for internet research and reporting which you should strongly consider:

1) As a researcher, you really need to be aware of the quality and authorship of your sources.

EX:
Visit this webpage:
http://www.martinlutherking.org

At first glance, the site appears to be a wonderful source of information on Martin Luther King, jr., a Nobel-prize winning civil rights leader.

However, close scrutiny reveals a few interesting things.

First, read all the text on the page (carefully).

Second, notice (at the bottom of the page) the author/host of the site:
http://www.stormfront.org
(Note: This site is home to a white supremacist group).

Obviously, information on this site may run contradictory to your needs and may be misleading.

Consider the content and context before using the material on a web page.

2) When conducting research for secondary sources, many instructors advise using only approved, peer-reviewed, and peer-edited sources such as library databases, published books, news publications, government publications, and academic journals.
EX:
If you are writing a paper about Whales, then Joe Smith's Webpage entitled the "Wonderful World of Whales" may not be a good resource. However, if find a page on Whales from the National Cetacean Institute or even the National Fish and Wildlife Association, then you might have located a better source of information.

Government sponsored sites and sites owned by some universities may contain suitable information. On the other hand, they may not.

3) Even though a site is government sponsored of sponsored by an institution of higher education does not mean the information is static or even correct.

EX:
Depending on your religious beliefs, you may find conflicting information on the internet in regards to creation/evolution.

Currently, two very popular universities in the United States teach that the universe was created in seven days, and all men and women descended from Adam and Eve.

You might actually find information and sites to support these conclusions (although the only evidence of such events is strictly scriptural and is neither scientific nor physical).

Yet, such sites are vehement about their beliefs and work at length to demonstrate support for their information.   If this information is prudent for your subject matter, then fine. However, if you are looking for something more static, then you may need to consult other sources.

4) Make sure to note all of the information on the page (authors, dates, sponsors, URLs, and other facets which seem important.

Note: Some information may be found inside of the html code of the webpage. You may have to locate the function on your web browser which reveals the SOURCE code or the Markup Language.

5) Researching is not necessarily easy. For example, examining the word RESEARCH reveals two key ideas: RE (as in the idea of repetition or revisiting) and SEARCH (as in finding or locating things). Put together, you can surmise that RESEARCH actually means to actively search for material over and over again. The idea implies trial and error, success and defeat, and exercising a mindset which involves finding sources which are appropriate (and distinguishing them from sources which are not appropriate).

6) Try to have a mix of sources. Use books, articles, government documents, and reliable websites (with reliable sponsors). Instructors often appreciate when students can provide a mix of sources (this practice helps the instructor to believe that the student is a keen researcher and maintains a good work ethic for researching). As the saying goes, "Don't put all your eggs in one basket" (That is, make sure to have a diverse mix of sources in support of your subject matter).

7) Make sure to locate an adequate amount of sources before even attempting to write your paper. You may have to visit with a librarian to find additional materials. Do not be afraid to ask for help. Even the best researchers may falter and need help finding materials.

8) Remember the sources you need may not even be in your library. You may have to consult with the librarian who may recognize that a source must be ordered or interlibrary loaned. Therefore, give yourself plenty of time to obtain the sources you need to write the paper.

9) Finally, always seek out the most current and most reliable source of information for anything. As we discussed in the beginning, sources may contained plagiarized information or even "Hearsay" information (which is information which one person heard but is not necessarily accurate or even true).

EX:
One popular culture commentator remarked on his/her website that the city of London had succumb to a very deadly strain of the flu. Within hours, many people where changing plans about traveling to the British Isles. However, the information was not entirely accurate. Apparently, only a hospital ward worth of people had contracted the disease from each other (prompting only light isolation).

EX:
A few internet sites had reported that Apple Computers Inc, Founder Steve Jobs had a heart attack. With many investors fearing financial ruin, several sold their stock, prompting a drop in the price of Apple. However, the rumors circulated on the internet were untrue, and after confirmation the stock surged upward in price over the following days. Several people reported having to buy back their stock at a higher price due to bad information.

MEDIA BIAS
One of the most substantial concerns about research, especially with concern to news sites and newsgroups, is media bias. Some publications lean more right (or conservative) while others lean more left (or liberal). This dichotomy makes it difficult to find sites without bias.