Summary –

The Internet can be a rich and valuable source of information – and an even richer source of misinformation. Sorting out the valuable claims from the worthless ones is tricky, since at first glance a Web site written by an expert can look a lot like one written by the next-door neighbor. This lesson offers students background and practice in determining authority on the internet – how to tell whether an author has expertise or not, and whether you’re getting the straight story.

Activity –

1. **Anatomy of a URL**

Before even looking at a Web site’s content, students should notice the site’s top-level domain. For sites based in the U.S., these will usually be one of the following: .com, .org, .net, .mil, .gov, .edu. Non-U.S. sites will often have a TLD denoting their country of origin, for instance .au for Australia, although people from any country can purchase .com, .org and .net domain names.

Traditionally, .com denotes a commercial entity, .org means a nonprofit organization, and .net is a network (for instance, an Internet service provider). In practice, anyone can purchase a .com, .org or .net domain name, and individuals often buy a .org or .net domain when their preferred .com is not available. However, it is still true that many nonprofit organizations will avoid .com domains so as to avoid implying that they have a commercial component. It’s also true that, while not all .coms are commercial, all large commercial organizations will have .com addresses.

The .gov, .mil and .edu TLDs can only go to government, military and educational sites respectively, so they reflect a different order of authority from a .com or a .org. Students and faculty can both have personal Web sites with .edu TLDs, so be aware of whether the site is an official school Web site, a research site or a personal site. Personal sites will often have the user’s name in the URL. Information on a .gov or .mil site has the backing of the (local, state or federal) government or the military. It may be difficult to find a single author for these sites, but you can assume that the information has a certain amount of authority because of this association. This does not necessarily mean that information on these sites is true – for instance, in 2005, the sex education Web site 4parents.gov was found to make a number of incorrect assertions and omit important information. But it does mean that the government or military tacitly approves of the site. If nothing else, .gov and .mil sites can be counted upon to reflect the views of the government and military.

Some domains, such as wordpress.org and blogspot.com, exist to give free platforms to anyone with something to say. Web sites hosted on one of these domains are less credible than other sites, because they are available to anyone (unlike, for instance, a page on NYTimes.com). Their information is not necessarily false, but should be approached with more caution.

**Activity 1: Rank the following URLs in order of authority:**

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ http://random.blogspot.com

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ http://www.random.gov

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ http://www.columbia.edu/~jrandom

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ http://www.random.com

1. **Finding the Author**

The word “authority” comes from the same root as “author.” A source’s authority often depends on who its author is. This is usually easy to determine with books and magazine articles. Some nonfiction books are written under a pseudonym, or pen name, but most print authors take responsibility for their work right on the cover or in the byline.

On the Internet, authorship can be more difficult to determine. Some sites have only one author. Others have many authors, who may or may not use their real names. Some sites have no obvious author – their content may be written by a number of people who do not get authorship credit.

It’s generally best not to trust any information you find on the Internet until you can at least determine who wrote it. Many Web sites have an “about” section. If this doesn’t answer your question, check for contact information. Sometimes an FAQ (frequently asked questions) list will answer questions about authorship.

**Activity 2: Find the Author(s)**

1. Who authored the website that you were assigned?
2. Is there a single author? Is there a group of author? Is authorship restricted or unrestricted?
3. If you cannot find a named author, can you get other clues about where the content is coming from?
4. Does your site have editors? If so describe them.

(*Editors often write content – and on some sites may be responsible for most of the available content – but they are also in charge of maintaining a certain standard of accuracy in a site, book or other publication. The presence of an editor, and especially of a full editorial staff, implies that there is some amount of oversight. However, the fact that a site is edited does not necessarily mean that it is neutral or correct.)*

1. **The Author’s Authority**

Not all authors are equal in credibility. Once you’ve found out who’s responsible for the site’s content, you need to find out whether they have any expertise.

A book’s author will often put relevant information in an “about the author” section on the book flap. Some Web sites also have “about the author” sections. For others, you will have to do more digging – you may want to Google the name of the author or authors. You may also have to make some educated guesses.

**Activity 3: Author’s Authority**

Study your assigned Web sites to answer as many of the following questions as they can. For some sites, they will be answering questions about an editor rather than an author.

1. What is the author’s education level?
2. Does he or she have a degree? From what school? In what subject?
3. What is the author’s previous writing experience?
4. How much does the author probably know about the topic or topics on which he or she is writing?
5. Does he or she deal intimately with this subject in daily life, or only research it for the purpose of writing about it?
6. If relevant, has he or she performed experiments and independent research projects on this topic?
7. Does the author have a neutral perspective on the site’s subject matter, or is he or she trying to promote a particular viewpoint?
8. **Sponsorship**

Even an author with a high level of expertise can offer misleading information. Many Web sites have an agenda – they have an interest, usually either ideological or financial, in presenting a skewed version of reality. This can also be true with print media. Magazines, newspapers and publishing houses may have directors or sponsors who support a particular viewpoint.

Determining sponsorship can be tricky. Check the bottom of the page for the logo of a sponsoring organization. An “information” or “about” page or an FAQ may point you to organizations that are involved with the page. You should also look at the affiliations of the author(s) and editor(s). Of course, some sites are independent entities and have no sponsorship – their authority would rest on the credibility of the author.

If the site’s URL is along the lines of “organization.com/blogs,” students should check out the “parent site” – in this case, organization.com. That parent site may be a blogging platform like blogger.com or wordpress.com, but it may be a sponsoring institution.

If students find that the site has a sponsor, they should investigate using Google to find out how the organization is perceived. Don’t take a group at its word – find out what other people are saying about it as well.

**Activity 4: Sponsorship**

Determine, as best they can, the answers to these questions:

1. Is there an organization that is in charge of the site’s content, or that funds the site’s operation?
2. Does this organization have a vested interest in the site’s subject matter?
3. What perspective do they want people to have on this topic?
4. Are they likely to encourage the author(s) and editor(s) to give a skewed presentation?