

HISTORY LAB 1 Transcript

How do I know if a website is a reliable source?

Ask a
Historian



Emily Tran: From the University of Wisconsin–Madison. This is *Ask a Historian*'s History Lab, a miniseries about how to do history.

Today on the show: how do I know if a website is a reliable source of historical research?

[MUSIC FADES]

Right now, middle and high school students across Wisconsin are putting together independent or group historical research projects for the National History Day contest.

Here at the *Ask a Historian* podcast, we thought we'd lend a hand by answering students' and teachers' questions about historical research and methodology in this miniseries called the History Lab.

Now, the History Lab is a real place on the UW–Madison campus. That's where undergraduates can get advice on researching and writing their history assignments. We're bringing that advice directly to you through this History Lab miniseries. In each episode, I'll talk to a professor here in UW–Madison's History Department about a question that a student or teacher has sent in.

Today my guest is Professor Sarah Thal.

Sarah Thal: I'm Sarah Thal. I'm Professor of Japanese History at UW–Madison, and I research and teach the history of Japan, especially political, religious, intellectual history. Right now, I'm working on a history of the way of the samurai.

Emily Tran: Professor Thal, welcome to *Ask a Historian*.

Sarah Thal: Thank you. It's great to be here.

Emily Tran: So, our question today is from Matthew, who is a teacher here in Madison. So, here's the question:

Matthew: What do you consider a reliable website, and is Wikipedia one of them?

Emily Tran: I think this is a great question, both in terms of historical research and generally navigating the world today. So, how do I know if a website that I'm looking at is a reliable source?

Sarah Thal: This is a much more difficult question than it should be. The main way is to figure out who is behind it, who wrote the articles, who is editing it, who is publishing it, and who is paying for it. So, to really figure out whether a website is reliable or not, you need to do some research.

You want to look for websites that tell you who wrote the material that's on it. If there are articles, are they signed? Are they attributed to a person? And you can look up that person and see who they are.

Then you want to see, you know, who's editing it. What's the process for somebody to get something onto this website? Can it just be anybody? So, you might need to dig around on the website, look at the 'About Us' part, look about how to submit material or something, and find out what kind of review process is there. Do submissions get reviewed rigorously and checked for factual correctness, for instance?

Then you want to see who's publishing it. This is when you want to look up at the, at the web address. If it ends in .edu, that's a good sign. It's not perfect—there are some questionable things that get published through universities—but if it's .edu, it's probably more reliable than say .com. That might be a clue to say, 'Hey, are they trying to sell me something,' right?

But you can also look at who's sponsoring the page. See what kinds of logos turn up on the page to figure out who's behind it and then also who pays for it. Sometimes it's published by one organization and paid for by another. Or you want to check out who funds the organization that's publishing it. And all of this material is not necessarily going to be found on that website, you might need to dig around elsewhere to find out who's behind different organizations.

So, for me, to figure out whether a website is reliable is to look up those, those who's, you know: who wrote the stuff; who edited it; who published it; who paid for it. Then think about the review process, who's been looking over the material to make sure that it's high quality and do I trust them?

Emily Tran: So, it's not really just a checklist where you can look really quickly and then mark things off. But you kind of have to go do your own research before you can even know if the site is reliable.

Sarah Thal: Exactly.

And it's really hard sometimes to find some of this out. So, some of the things you can't, you might not be able to find answers to. So, then you combine your awareness of these who's—you know, who's behind it all—with some other clues on the website.

You might look at the language they're using. Are the descriptive adjectives or adverbs very inflammatory? Are they really obviously trying to convince you of something, or are they partaking in some kind of vocabulary that's quite extreme, on one end of the political spectrum or another? So, look at the language.

Look at the evidence. Do they actually provide links or citations to sources to back up their claims? Look at the kinds of assumptions they make. Do they assume that you think that the earth is flat? Well then maybe you might question other things about this website.

Look at the argument. Do they jump to conclusions without actually giving you the steps of logic along the way?

And, and then also think about the relationships to other information that you know, or other sources that you found. If there are conflicts or contradictions, then you want to question, 'Hey, which should I believe, how should I weigh these two sources of information? How do I deal with that contradiction?'

So, I actually, I like to think of this—as I call it in my mind, I call it CLEAR analysis. I think about the context, especially, you know: who wrote these things; when did they write them; where they write them; for whom; that kind of thing.

So: Context; Language; Evidence; Argument; and Relationships. C-L-E-A-R. CLEAR. [Laughter]

Emily Tran: Oh, I love that.

Sarah Thal: It's my little—I know—it's my little mnemonic for remembering what I want to look at when I'm assessing a source.

Emily Tran: And so, with that acronym in mind—CLEAR; context, language, evidence, argument relationship—let's now consider the website that Matthew brought up, which I think is everyone's favorite place to start: Wikipedia. Do you think Wikipedia is a reliable place for historical research?

Sarah Thal: I think it's a great first step when you're doing historical research. When you want to find out something quickly, when you're still trying to formulate what you're thinking about what you're going to research, going to Wikipedia is a great idea because you can get answers really quickly and there are citations down at the bottom, so that you can find other resources.

Once you get into your topic, then you're going to want to double check that some of that basic information that you got from Wikipedia is actually correct. You want to find that information in other sources, and you'll want to judge the sources for yourself.

So, Wikipedia is very handy. It's very convenient. One of the reasons it's convenient is because all sorts of people around the world come together to add information to it. But that means that anybody can add to it and until an editor gets to it—and editors are volunteers as well—until somebody else gets to it, it may contain false or misleading information. So, you want to just take it with a grain of salt. It's a great first step that you need to double check if you're going to use it for anything substantive.

Emily Tran: So, sort of the greatest benefit of Wikipedia—the fact that it's crowd-sourced—is also a weakness.

Sarah Thal: Absolutely.

Emily Tran: So, if Wikipedia is a good place to start your research, are there some other websites that you would suggest that are reliable where students can continue their research once they've figured out what they're interested in and have some basic facts?

Sarah Thal: Oh my gosh. There are so many amazing websites out there now. I couldn't even begin to list them, but there are a few things to think about.

One is usually libraries, archives, and museums. If they have websites, it's usually going to be very high quality because they're digitizing a bunch of their primary sources and then they're featuring them and writing about the context, giving some kind of introduction so you know how to think about these sources. So, for instance, the New York Public Library, the British Library, the National Archives, the Smithsonian, the Wisconsin Historical Society. All of these places have primary sources that they're featuring, and that they're putting into a context that you can use.

There are all sorts of organizations and people putting up digital exhibits that are fascinating. Once again, when you're looking at these online resources, look at who's putting them up, who's sponsoring them, and what kinds of sources are they using. What kinds of evidence are they offering to support their points? So, for instance, there's a *Slave Voyages* digital memorial which is fascinating, with commentary by well-known historians, lots of primary sources that bolster their points. *Remembering Jim Crow* has a bunch of oral histories. You go, go to these kinds of digital museums or digital resources and look up the citations, the resources, the 'for further reading' at the end. And you'll see what kinds of evidence that they rely on, what kinds of materials, and often those are links to digitized things that you'll be able to find yourself online.

Then there are the commentaries or articles written by historians. A lot of those you'd have to access through, say, a university library but some are much more available and they can be available in multiple ways. Some might be on websites where historians write articles such as, say the *History News Network*, or the Organization of American Historians, or the American Historical Association. These places often have journals or publications that they make at least part of them available publicly, digitally.

Also, if you find out that a scholar or historian has written something that you're interested in or they're interested in this topic, see if you can find their personal webpage. Many people will put links to PDFs of the articles that they have written so that they're available to anybody, even if normally you'd have to find them through a university library website, for instance.

There's so many other things, so many innovative things that people are doing for history. Videos. TED-Ed. TED has these animated videos, often about historical topics, that are actually usually written by, say, professors or scholars who are specialists in the field, and they work with the editors of TED-Ed to make some really engaging videos. And the scholar themselves, you know, makes sure that mistakes don't creep in.

So, once again we're back to thinking about who made these resources? Whatever you're doing, you want to say, you know, 'Who wrote it? Who edited it? Who published it? Who paid for it? And what are the resources, what are the sources the primary sources, the secondary sources? What are they basing their points on?'

Emily Tran: I will put links to all of those websites and projects that you mentioned in the show notes so people can check those out.

My final question for you: What is the one piece of advice that you would give to a student who is getting ready for National History Day?

Sarah Thal: Ideally, you'll spend a lot of time on your National History Day project. It'll take some time to—and multiple revisions—to make whatever you're doing, whether it's a documentary or a

webpage or a paper, it'll take multiple revisions to make whatever you do something that you're proud of and that you're excited about. So, you want to pick a topic that you are really interested in. Don't just pick a topic because you think somebody else thinks it's a good idea. Pick something that you want to actually study. And that's gonna be one of the big keys to your success—your excitement and your passion for this topic.

Emily Tran: Well, thanks so much for being here, Professor Thal.

Sarah Thal: Thank you. It's great to talk with you.

Emily Tran: Students and teachers do you have a question about how to do history? Record a voice memo, send it in, and we'll take your question to a UW historian. Our email address is outreach@history.wisc.edu.

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Thank you for listening.