What’s in a (Domain) Name?

A media literacy resource for educators and libraries

This series of exercises helps students learn how to evaluate source domain name endings — such as .org and .com — and think critically about how domain names may relate to the reliability of a site.

- Suggested time: 1 hour 30 minutes
- Grade levels: 4-12
- Outcomes: Learn the scopes of different domain names; understand the benefits of checking reliability by using journalistic criteria.

Exercise 1: Evaluating assumptions about .org websites

Objective: Think critically about how to judge a website based on its domain, and re-examine assumptions about domain reliability.

Suggested time: 30 minutes

Consider the following two websites that publish information related to health:
1. childrenshealthdefense.org
2. emedicinehealth.com

Just based on the domain names of the websites, which site would you guess contains more reliable health information?

- Discuss why people may have picked the first option. Some (especially older students and teachers) may respond with option 1, and if asked for a reasoning will cite that .org websites are more reliable.
- Ask why one would assume .org websites are more reliable. What have we been told about them?
- Read NewsGuard’s labels for the two websites. Discuss NewsGuard's data and analysis on Red-rated .org websites.
Information for discussion

Despite widespread assumptions about .org websites being more trustworthy than those with .com or other domains, NewsGuard’s analysts found that many .org websites publish misinformation or have other severe credibility issues. In fact, websites with the .org domain ending do not actually need to meet any reliability standards to use the domain.

In the February 2022 edition of its Misinformation Monitor, NewsGuard reported:

• Of the 290 .org sites in NewsGuard’s U.S. database as of February 2022, nearly 20% — 56 sites — were Red-rated.
• Of the 43 U.K. and French-, Italian-, and German-language sites with a .org domain that NewsGuard had rated as of February 2022, nearly 50 percent were Red-rated, meaning they are generally unreliable.

You may have heard the claim that .org websites are more trustworthy than .com websites, or that they usually belong to non-profit organizations and have good intentions.

• Public Interest Registry (PIR), the non-profit that owns and manages all .org domains, markets its well-known suffix as “one of the most trusted domains”. The ‘About’ section of PIR’s website calls .org the “domain of trust”, and the “domain of choice for organizations dedicated to serving the public interest.”
• Harvard’s College Writing Program, on the university’s website, instructs students to check whether a website is a .org to determine if it is a non-profit site.

However, there are a few reasons why this is not true:

• PIR does not monitor the ‘reliability’ of information published on .org websites
• While PIR fights the abuse of its acceptable use policy, the act of publishing misinformation or disinformation does not count as ‘abuse’.
• Anyone can buy a .org domain for a nominal fee without meeting any criteria, unlike a .edu or .gov site -- .org websites have not been required to be run by non-profits since 2019.
Examples of red-rated or generally unreliable websites that have a .org domain
- 4chan.org, a notorious platform housing online forums rife with pornography, xenophobia, and violent imagery.
- MedAlerts.org, a site associated with an anti-vaccine non-profit that regularly publishes false and misleading information about vaccines.

Exercise 2: Judging a website by its domain name

Objective: Differentiating between domain types in order to tackle misconceptions about websites and their domain names.

Suggested time: 20 minutes

You have four domain options (.com, .org, .edu, and .gov). For each website description, ask students which domain (multiple) the website could have:

1. A community college website that also posts information relevant to the college
2. A non-profit group that spreads false information by claiming that climate change is not real
3. A for-profit business that markets health and wellness packages while posting health news and information
4. A US federal agency website that posts information about agricultural developments
Information for discussion

- There are many different types of domains, also known as TLDs (Top-Level Domains) or domain name extensions.

- **.com** was a domain originally intended for websites owned by commercial enterprises. It is now the most common domain name and is used by many different websites serving a variety of commercial and non-commercial purposes.

- **.org** is generally used by non-profit organizations, but can actually be used by any website for a small fee. Until 2019, the website had to be run by a non-profit (although nonprofits need not be reliable or well-intentioned), but that is no longer a requirement either.

- **.net** is another common TLD. It was originally used for websites that connected many smaller websites, but now can be used by any website.

- **.edu** is available to post-secondary education institutions in the US.

- **.gov** is only available to “U.S.-based government and public sector organizations”.

- **.mil** is used by the United States Department of Defense and its subsidiary or affiliated organizations.

- There are many new domains that can be found now—**.news** can be used by news organizations of any size; **.wiki** is for wiki websites that can be edited by the public; **.biz** is restricted to commercial entities.

Exercise 3: More than what meets the eye

**Objectives:** Understand the limitations of making assumptions about a website based on its domain name, visual aesthetics, etc., and instead learn to evaluate websites using journalistic criteria like those used in NewsGuard's analysis.
**Suggested time:** 40 minutes

Now that we know how to make some informed evaluations of domain names, let’s look at how we judge websites based on their landing pages.

- What are some hints that the website may meet or fail some NewsGuard criteria?
- What other information would you need to be more confident about giving these websites a green or red rating? (Hint: look at NewsGuard's nine criteria)

1) [https://www.historyofvaccines.org/](https://www.historyofvaccines.org/)

2) [https://www.thehealthyamerican.org/](https://www.thehealthyamerican.org/)
What are some clues that these websites would be green or red rated?

- Discuss your thoughts on these websites, and then look at the NewsGuard Nutrition Labels for each of them. Did you pick up any hints from the websites' landing pages?
- Why is it better to check how the website publishes content, headlines, and ownership according to NewsGuard's criteria rather than looking at its landing page?