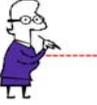


Deconstructing Web Pages Work Sheet

This exercise takes you step by step through the process of deconstructing a web page in order to determine its credibility as a source of information.

Use these icons to guide your work:

	Read and think about what's being said
	Search for something on the Internet
	Record your findings. Be specific!!
	Stop, reflect and write!



Imagine that you have to research a science project on the artificial sweetener, aspartame. You come across an article that is identified as an evaluation of the safety of aspartame by a licenced medical professional named Dr. Joseph Mercola on "The World's #1 Natural Health Website".



View the page at http://www.mercola.com/article/aspartame/hidden_dangers.htm



List 5 specific troubling effects of aspartame mentioned by Dr. Mercola:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____



What are you thinking about aspartame right now?





Though the statements by Dr. Mercola are passionate, further research is needed before accepting them as fact...

Let's ask some questions...

Who?



Who is Dr. Joseph Mercola and who sponsored his article titled "Aspartame's Hidden Dangers"?

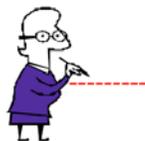
Is information about the author and the sources for the article clearly stated or easy to access?

Dr. Mercola provides a lot of information on his credentials and motivations. However, a Web search can be used to dig a little deeper and verify what he says.



Using the search engine Google, **search** for the name "Dr. Joseph Mercola."

Visit several of the resulting sites.



List several key points of information you discovered about Dr. Joseph Mercola:



What?

What are you getting?

Is the information biased?

Does the site use loaded language or make broad, unsubstantiated claims?

Can the information be verified through other sources?



What about the references Dr. Mercola provides?

Most of the sources for the claims that are made are about 20 years old. Some are even close to 40 years old! A lot of research has been done since then. Have a look at the very first reference Dr. Mercola provides (source “i”, titled: “Critical Reviews in Toxicology”, dated 2007. This is provided to substantiate the claim that aspartame is in over 6,000 products, which it does. But look at what the abstract actually says about aspartame!)



What did you discover?

Let’s check some of the statements made by Dr. Mercola for bias...

“The American Diabetes Association (ADA) is actually recommending this chemical poison to persons with diabetes...”

“How aspartame was approved is a lesson in how chemical and pharmaceutical companies can manipulate government agencies...”

The speaker uses emotional language to persuade his audience and create a sense of urgency about finding out more about the dangers of aspartame. He makes strong claims, but does so using vague language and sources of dubious quality. He implies that:

1. Aspartame causes multiple sclerosis.

“... Chronic exposure to this sweetener can bring about or worsen serious conditions such as... multiple sclerosis...” (from the video)

2. Aspartame causes brain cancer.

“In a two-year study conducted by the manufacturer of aspartame, twelve of 320 rats fed a normal diet and aspartame developed brain tumors while none of the control rats developed tumors, and five of the twelve tumors were in rats given a low dose of aspartame.”

It’s important to note the information gaps in statements like these. This website contains an abundance of attributed information, but very little direct links to actual, modern research to substantiate the claims.

Dr. Mercola blames aspartame for a host of illnesses and mentions lots of research and researchers, but provides no links or references for most of these.

A critical reader might wonder why, if aspartame is responsible for so many serious health problems, Canadian and American medical associations have not raised the alarm.

Because he repeatedly implies that the FDA (the agency responsible for protecting the health of the public and for monitoring substances like aspartame in the U.S.) is either incompetent or corrupt, and because he specifically



mentions connections between aspartame, cancer and multiple sclerosis, it might be a good idea to see what other organizations have to say about it:

Visit these organization websites and **record** what they have to say about the aspartame connection.



Health Canada http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/securit/addit/sweeten-edulcor/aspartame-eng.php	
The National Multiple Sclerosis Association http://www.nationalmssociety.org/What-is-MS/What-Causes-MS/Disproved-theories	
European Food Safety Authority http://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/efsajournal/doc/3496.pdf	
American Cancer Society http://www.cancer.org/cancer/cancercauses/othercarcinogens/athome/aspartame	

When?



When was this article posted?

Is it current?

Has it been updated?

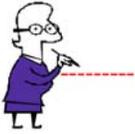
Although the “Whats” are certainly enough to make you question the information on this web page, let’s follow through on the other Ws, to see what we come up with.

Questions surrounding the currency of this information also bring up some interesting points.



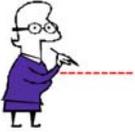
Visit the original web page where this information was found was at www.mercola.com/article/aspartame/hidden_dangers.htm





When was this article posted?

Further investigation shows that many, if not most, of the references on this page are more than 20 years old.



What are the dates (the year) of the research presented on this page?



Why is knowing the date of the information important?

Where?



Where is this web page located? What's the nature of the site? Is it a personal home page?

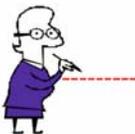
Is it part of a medical site?

The article talks about the link between aspartame and multiple sclerosis, so is it part of the Multiple Sclerosis Foundation's website?

Where is this web page located? The original page where we found this information about aspartame was at www.mercola.com/article/aspartame/hidden_dangers.htm



Pare this URL down to its base: www.mercola.com to learn more about the nature of the website hosting this information.



What did you discover?

Why?

Why would I use this site as a credible source of information?

Can I verify the information I've found?

The question that remains to be asked is WHY would we think this site is a credible source of information?



In researching this topic, we've learned a number of things:

- First, there are individuals and organizations that believe aspartame poses a health risk.
- Second, this belief is not shared by the medical profession at large and claims about the risks associated with aspartame have not been clinically proven.

Remember that your project was to research a science project on the artificial sweetener, aspartame.



It's safe to assume that the individuals who believe that aspartame is dangerous are sincere.

It would also be accurate to use this website as an example of one side of the aspartame debate.

Look through this packet again. Summarize the main reasons this website might not be the 'best' source of information on the topic.

Adapted by Information Literacy teacher Heidi Erstad, of Eisenhower Middle School in New Berlin, WI, from MediaSmarts' "Getting the Goods: Deconstructing Web Pages" tip sheet.

