Researching in the Digital Age

A Helpful Guide to Finding and Evaluating Information

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Locating information

•Think about the best place to find the information you need: newspapers, books, popular magazines, scholarly journals, enclcyopedia, etc.

•Library databases (subscription services) are excellent sources for full-text articles from reliable sources. BHS subscribes to LitFinder, Gale Group, Digital Knowledge Center, Facts on File, and SIRS. TexShare data bases are available to students who have a public library card. See our librarian for help obtaining one. Links to all these sites can be found at www.texasschoolmarm.net. User names and passwords are located on your library database handout.

•Search Engines locate information on websites, but not all search engines are equal. Check out Infopeople's Best Search Tools Chart which compares major search engines, two meta-search engines, and four selected subject directories. Find it at http://infopeople.org/search/chart.html

Search Strategies

A Researcher's Best Friend

Key word search

•The most important key to finding relevant information is using specific terms. Typing "American family" yields 29,100,000 hits on a Google search, but using advanced search and adding the phrase "single parent" and "childcare" cuts the number to 44,500—still too many to search through.

•Dogpile is a meta-search engine that produces fewer but more relevant hits. Typing the same phrases into dogpile's advanced search yields 53 hits. A helpful column also appears with suggested topics such as Family Structure and Changing American Family.

•Researchers should remember the basics of Boolean terms. Google and Teoma only recognize NOT, while Yahoo! recognizes AND, OR, NOT, ( ). (These terms must be ALL CAPS.)

Retrieving & Retaining Information

Depending on the website where you locate your article, you will have several options.

•News websites such as New York Times and Washington Post provide printer- friendly links to articles that omit ads.

•Library databases such as EBSCO also offer a "clean copy for printing" option.

Some websites allow users to copy information and paste it into a word-processing document.

•Tip: Be sure to include all citation information. That article will be nearly impossible to find again without it.

PDF files can be printed and/or saved to a disk. If the article is in a PDF format, you will need Adobe Reader, which can be downloaded free from http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html.

•Tip: Be sure to record the website where you retrieved it, as this information does not always print on a PDF document.

"Once you have learned how to ask relevant and appropriate questions, you have learned how to learn, and no one can keep you from learning whatever you want or need to know."

NEIL POSTMAN AND CHARLES WEINGARTNER
Teaching as a Subversive Activity

Evaluating Information for Accuracy & Validity

Why should I worry about it?

Wise researchers make the effort to evaluate information before accepting it as true. One's credibility is destroyed if readers see that information is biased, inaccurate, and/or simplistic.

The World Wide Web makes it possible for virtually anyone with the money to build a site to publish information. Credible websites include About Us pages and documentation for the ideas presented. It is the user's responsibility, however, to check the following critera: authority, accuracy, objectivity, and coverage.

Authority

- Who is the author and what authority does s/he have on this topic?
- Who is the publisher of the information?
- What is the relationship between the author of the web page and the publisher/server?

Currency

- When was the data gathered?
- What dates do the data cover?
- When was the document last updated?

Accuracy

- Can the information be verified?
- Are sources documented in a bibliography?
- If data (statistics) is included, is the way it was gathered cleary explained?

Objectivity

- Is the mission or purpose of the website clearly identified?
- Is the site trying to sell you a product, service, or idea?
- Is information on the site documented with references?
- Is the information balanced?

Coverage

- Is this the right web page for you?
- How deeply is the topic covered? Does the information present a simple, surface coverage or does it attempt to address the topic's complexity
- Does the author display a breadth of knowledge on the subject?
- Coverage is really the sum total of all the other criteria--Authority, Accuracy, Bias, and Currency.

Inquiring Minds : What do you want to know?

The meanings and pronunciations of unfamiliar words are only a keystroke away on the Web.

- Bartleby provides a whole reference shelf at the user's fingertips: dictionary, thesaurus, encyclopedias, quotations, English usage, and more.
http://www.Bartleby.com

- Oxford English Dictionary provides published quotations in addition to definitions and etymologies. Find the user name and password on the database handout.
http://dictionary.oed.com/entrance.dtl

- Webopedia is an online encyclopedia dedicated to computer technology
http://webopedia.internet.com/TERM/T/TCP_IP.html

- OWL, Purdue University's online writing lab, is a complete reference tool. Find help with proper documentation (APA and MLA), writing, and Internet use to name just a few.
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/

Computers can make learning come to life

Performing Dangerous Experiments? Predicting Complexity? Need to Stop Time? Simulations are the answer

Simulations are essential in many areas of science and technology. When problems become more complex, it is difficult to use pure math techniques to predict what will happen.

Technology can also allow people to perform dangerous experiments and witness the outcomes safely, as well as condense or expand time, making events visible in a matter of minutes.

Two free simulation sites found with a simple google search:

View physics simulations and more at MyPhysicsLab http://www.myphysicslab.com/

View simulations related to the human body at MedMotion: Interactive Health Care Education http://www.medmotion.com/home.html

Use the virtual chemistry lab at The ChemCollective: Virtual Lab http://www.chemcollective.org/vlab/vlab.php

It's a small world after all

Virtual Environments create worldwide learning communities

The Internet offers a myriad of virtual environments to users, from chat rooms to secure discussion boards.

The idea of "meeting" with people from all across the world is both exciting and mind-boggling, but these experiences also have limitations.

Most importantly, remember that people can pretend to be anyone in a virtual environment.

Never give out personal information or completely trust information from these sources.

Check accuracy of information against other sources before using it.

Secure discussion boards are more trustworthy, especially if run by a university or public school for educational use. They offer quiet students equal opportunity to express their opinions and can facilitate some lively debates.

A discussion board is much more formal than chat rooms or IM conversations, especially if hosted by a school as part of a course. Posts may be evaluated for content quality and effective commuication.

Remember that many times your conversations are the only way people know you; remember to make a good impression.

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