

Preface

But I read it on the Internet—it must be true!

The Internet is the most powerful, convenient and potentially manipulative medium ever invented. It can give you any version of the truth you are looking for. Not only does information expand and change every day, the rules for finding information also change.

For many students, the Web is the dominant medium and the place they most likely go to find information. Unfortunately, many students accept information that looks authentic as the “truth” and this is one of the dangers of researching on the Web—especially since anyone can publish almost anything they want.

The ability to think critically about Web information is an essential skill for teachers and students. Web literacy goes beyond reading the content of a Web page (which is still an important step!). It also means becoming knowledgeable in the grammar of the Internet:

- Knowing how to read a URL
- Finding out who published a Web site
- Looking to see who is linked to a site

Being Web literate means you understand how search engines work and how information is controlled. It also means you have the skills to perform powerful searches that can potentially save time and frustration.

The purpose of this guidebook is to help teachers and students learn more about Web literacy and develop critical-thinking skills. It is a practical resource full of exercises, tips, handouts and stories drawn from educators around the world. There is a wide variety of activities to use in the classroom or try on your own. You will be introduced to a multitude of skill sets and helpful resources.

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE CHAPTER BY CHAPTER

This book begins by explaining the basics of the Internet, setting the stage by introducing scaffolds and terminology critical to developing Web literacy skills. As chapters progress, so does the complexity of information. Depending on your level of comfort with the Web, you may wish to skip over various sections.

Chapter 1—Web Basics for Critical Thinking

- The Essentials
- Exploring the Grammar of the Internet

Chapter 2—The Empowered Researcher

- How Do Search Engines Work?
- Who Controls Information on the Internet?

Chapter 3—Get REAL: How to Validate Information on the Web

- Read the URL
- Examine the Content
- Ask About the Author and Owner

Chapter 4—Look at the Links

- Forward Links and Back Links

Chapter 5—Research Outside the Box: A Guide to Smart Searching

- Search With Extensions
- Creating a Virtual Index
- Finding Resources in Teacher Web Sites
- Calling All Colleagues

Chapter 6—Expanding the Boundaries: Blogs, RSS, Podcasts and Wikis

- Blogs
- RSS
- Podcasts
- Wikis

Chapter 7—Strategies and Evaluation: Putting It All Together

- Get REAL
- REAL Resources

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is designed to provide hands-on activities that allow you to practise and explore new concepts as they are introduced. Some of these activities may be used with students—some are designed for you to try on your own. Look for these headings for clarification:

Try This—Under this heading you will find activities for teachers to do on their own or preview first before using in the classroom. Activities in these sections often focus on professional development issues, such as how to find teacher resources in specific Web sites or from other teachers around the world. They may contain examples that may not be appropriate for all ages of student audiences.

Student Review—This heading refers to information that is recommended to review with students prior to beginning a For Students activity. Student Reviews outline important questions or considerations central to the Web literacy concept being introduced.

For Students—This refers to activities to try in the classroom. Often there are sites provided for you, or in some instances you are encouraged to find your own, related to your particular subject area. Any worksheets used in a For Students activity will be found at the end of each chapter.

Assessment—At the end of each chapter, you will find a formative assessment to use with your students. These multiple choice questions review the skills and terminology introduced in each chapter. An answer key is included.

Questions for Further Thought and Discussion—These questions are to be used as you think more deeply about the content presented in this book. The questions are designed to spur discussion among your peers.

I hope you find this guide to be a practical and worthwhile investment of your valuable time.

Introduction

Long, long ago, there was a magical invention called paper. Children learned quickly how to use this new technology for activities such as reading and writing, long before many of their teachers and parents knew how. It was so much faster, easier (and lighter!) than stone and chisel.

The children were excited about all of the possibilities of this new technology. They could express themselves to the world! However, since there were few adult role models to provide proper guidance, some children abused this newfound power. Girls were known to write mean and nasty notes to one another. Boys were spending way too much time using it for playing games rather than accomplishing something worthwhile. Paper was causing all sorts of problems.

When the adults found out what the children were up to with the technology, they were horrified. Paper had to be stopped! It was making the children do bad things and they needed to be protected. And so it was decided that paper should be banned from schools. The children were not upset because they knew they could still use the new technology when they were outside of school. It was free and there was nothing to stop them from accessing all that they wanted without parents and teachers even knowing. Banning paper from the schools did not help curb the children's abuse of it. In fact, things became much, much worse.

Years later, some of the adults, particularly the educators, reconsidered the original ban and decided to embed the technology into the process of learning. Paper became the primary media of learning and entirely replaced stone and chisel. Adults provided role models every day for reading and producing content. A new literacy was born and children were taught how to apply it across the curriculum.

ever, is that not all Web site authors are going to be reputable and reliable sources of information. Some sites, such as this Martin Luther King site, are downright insidious.

A key skill to validating Web sites is learning how to check for author and ownership information. Asking about the author and owner is the third step of REAL.

Author's Note

We do not condone sites of this nature; however, the reality is that if a student conducts a search for Martin Luther King in Google, the site used in this example generally appears in the top five results, claiming it is a "valuable resource for students and teachers". Research suggests that students are most likely to choose results on or near the top of a list of results, so many are likely to click on this site.

Ask About the Author

Just as you might teach students not to cite a book without knowing who is responsible for the information, consider applying those same principals to Web pages. Along with recognising the author of a site, students should also be trying to establish author credibility with respect to a Web site's topic.

For Students

Have students visit a series of Web sites related to a given subject area that you have preselected. Try to find an assortment of sites that supply author information and some that do not. With each site have them answer these questions.

1. Is the author's name provided?
2. Is there a contact person or an address provided?
3. Is there biographical information provided about the author?
4. Does the author seem knowledgeable? Is he or she an expert in the field?
5. What kinds of results do you see when you do a search on the author's name?

If there is no information about the author, students should be careful about wholly trusting the information on the Web page. They may need to validate more.