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The 6 Online Research Skills Your Students Need

The research skills your students need, and how to teach them

By Hannah Trierweiler Hudson

Grades: 6-8



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1. Check Your Sources

The Skill: Evaluating information found in your sources on the basis of accuracy, validity, appropriateness for needs, importance, and social and cultural context

The Challenge: While most kids know not to believe everything they read online, the majority also don't take the time to fully evaluate their sources, according to the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The same study showed that, on average, kids as young as 11 rate themselves as quite proficient Internet users, which may inflate their confidence.

The Solution: As a class, discuss the benchmarks for evaluating a website: currency (Is the information up to date?), security (Does the site ask for too much personal information or prompt virus warnings?), scope (Is the information in-depth?), and authority (Does the information come from a trusted expert?). Challenge partners to find one site that meets these benchmarks and one site that fails to do so. During research projects, encourage students to check the benchmarks off a list for each of the sources they use.

2. Ask Good Questions

The Skills: Developing and refining search queries to get better research results

The Challenge: Students will enter a search term, say, "Abraham Lincoln," and comb through pages of results that aren't related to their research (think Lincoln beards, Lincoln Logs), rather than narrowing their original query ("Lincoln assassination").

The Solution: Give small groups three search terms each, ranging from the general to the specific (e.g., "national parks," "Yellowstone," and "Yellowstone founding date"). Ask the groups to record how many results are returned for each term. Discuss how specificity can narrow their search to the results they need. Next, challenge groups to come up with three alternate search terms for the most specific item on their lists. (For the Yellowstone example, alternate terms might include "When was Yellowstone founded?" "history of Yellowstone" and "Who founded Yellowstone?") Compare the results and discuss how changing a few words can generate different information.



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3. Go Beyond the Surface

The Skill: Displaying persistence by continuing to pursue information to gain a broad perspective

The Challenge: Studies have shown that when using a search engine, kids often stop at the first search result, which they deem the most trustworthy.

The Solution: Invite students to create fact trees about whatever they are researching. The starting question is the root of the tree — for example, “How many planets are in the Milky Way?” Then, on branches coming out from the tree, students write facts or pieces of information that answer the question (“Scientists don’t know the exact number,” “There could be billions”). The catch is that each fact must come from a separate, documented source. Encourage students to find at least 10 sources of information to complete their fact trees.

4. Be Patient

The Skill: Displaying emotional resilience by persisting in information searching despite challenges

The Challenge: Today’s students are used to information on demand. So when they can’t find the answers to their questions after they’ve spent a few minutes poking around online, they may grow frustrated and throw in the towel.

The Solution: Challenge teams to come up with a well-researched answer to a question that isn’t “Google-able.” Opinion questions about popular culture work well for this activity. For example, “Who’s the best actor ever to have played James Bond?” “Which band is better: the Jonas Brothers or Justin Bieber?” Encourage teams to use a wide variety of sources in answering their questions, including what others have said, box office receipts, and awards. Determine a winner based on which team presents the most convincing case.

5. Respect Ownership

The Skill: Respecting intellectual property rights of creators and producers

The Challenge: Increasingly, young people don’t see piracy as stealing. One survey found that 86 percent of teens felt music piracy was “morally acceptable.”

The Solution: Make it personal. Invite students to write about what it would feel like to get a record deal, star in a movie, or have a book published. As a class, discuss the emotions involved. Then introduce the idea of piracy. Ask, “How would you feel if someone downloaded your music, movie, or book without paying for it?” You might also talk about how it would feel to not get paid for other types of work, such as working in an office or a school. How is piracy similar? How is it different?

6. Use Your Networks

The Skill: Using social networks and information tools to gather and share information

The Challenge: Some kids don’t understand the line between sharing information and plagiarizing it. A survey by plagiarism-prevention firm Turnitin found that the most widely used sources for cribbed material are sites like Facebook, Wikipedia, and Ask.com.

The Solution: Talk to kids about when you might use social sites for research. Provide a list of topics and have partners decide whether it would be a good idea to use these tools. Suggested topics: your family’s countries of origin, the life of Alexander the Great, and the events of September 11, 2001. What could members of your network contribute to each of these discussions? How wouldn’t they be helpful? How would you include information that friends and family share in your work?

Also explain that Wikipedia must be evaluated like any other website. In particular, students should focus on the sources cited in a Wikipedia article and ensure these sources are legitimate. You might have small groups analyze all of the sources for one Wikipedia article for currency, authority, scope, and security. Emphasize that it’s usually better to go back to the original source than to quote directly from Wikipedia.

RESEARCH: TECH AND THE TEEN BRAIN

- **Multitasking Takes a Toll**

According to research at the University of Michigan, homework can take between 25 to 400 percent longer when teens are taking breaks to check e-mail and download music. They lose time not only to the interruptions but also because they must reorient themselves when they return to the material.

- **Sleep Is Getting Short Shrift**

Earlier this year, the National Sleep Foundation released a survey showing that the average teen sleeps just seven and a half hours a night, two hours less than what’s recommended for healthy brain development. The culprits? Televisions, laptops, and cell phones in students’ bedrooms.

- **Inhibition Losing Ground**

Psychologists call the result of online anonymity “the disinhibition effect” because people of all ages share more than they would in real life. While this effect can lead to bullying, the good news is that there is also “benign disinhibition” — such as gay teens finding online support.

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By Hannah Trierweiler Hudson

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