

Common Sense on Research and Evaluation

Time to write a report? Increasingly, kids turn to the Web for answers.

It starts in about fourth grade. Your child comes home from school with a report to write. Off to the Internet they go. But as you probably know, not everything they find on the Web can be trusted. These tips will help you look beyond a site's slick appearance to determine whether it's offering high-quality, trustworthy content.

Some facts

62 percent of teens turn to the Internet for news, current events, and politics, according to a 2009 study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project

More than half of teen Internet users use Wikipedia, according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project

"YouTube" was the number one term searched by kids in 2009, according to a Norton Online Family Report

59 percent of kids ages 11 to 18 report that "some" information online was believable, and 30 percent said that "a lot" of information was believable, according to a report by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation on kids and credibility

What's the issue?

The Internet is bursting with information. Some of it's correct, some of it's questionable, and some of it is just plain wrong. But the Internet is typically the first place young people look when they begin researching a report or are just trolling for information on their favorite topic. And though it may start in elementary school, they'll continue using the Web right through college and beyond.

Why it matters

Anyone can publish on the Internet, so not all sites are equally trustworthy. Teens have the ability to be more skeptical, but younger children tend to believe what they read and accept it as the truth.

When children use sources they find online that aren't of high quality, they risk using incorrect information, getting only part of the story, and worst of all, denying themselves the opportunity to truly learn as much as possible about their topics of interest.

When children use a website for their research, they should make sure it's worthy of their trust. Fortunately, there are ways to evaluate the trustworthiness of a site. It takes looking beyond a website's inviting design to the substance and content of the material.

Parent tips for all kids

- » **Evaluate a website's credibility.** You can help your child dissect a website for clues to its accuracy with a little spy work. Here are some questions to ask that help determine the quality of a site.
- » **Who wrote this?** Check to make sure the author or organization is credible by looking at their title, expertise, and background.
- » **Dot what?** If the Web address ends in .edu, then the material is from an academic institution; if it ends in .gov, it's from Good Ol' Uncle Sam — and both of them are good signs!
- » **What is the source of information?** Does the site come from a well-known newspaper or organization?
- » **When was this updated?** Has the site been updated recently? If not, move on.
- » **What is this linked to?** Was the site linked from another webpage that you trust? That's not always a slam dunk in the credibility department, but it's probably a good sign.
- » **Compare multiple sources.** Kids should draw on several sites, for better accuracy. This will help them determine whether a piece of information is fact or fiction.
- » **Watch out for ads.** Help your kids notice when advertisers are trying to target them, and teach your kids to question what the ads are saying.

Parent tips for elementary school kids

- » **Ask questions while searching sites.** Get kids into the habit of asking questions like Who wrote this? Is this information trustworthy? This will help young children begin to think about the credibility of websites.
- » **Stay involved, but not over-involved.** Researching independently is an important skill to develop, but it can be difficult when parents are always nearby.

Parent tips for preteens and teens

- » **Follow school assignment guidelines.** Teachers often explicitly state their preferences for where students should search, how many sources they should gather, and in what format citations should be written.
- » **Use Wikipedia as a springboard for searching.** If kids need a jumpstart on finding information about a topic, Wikipedia is easily accessible. But remind them that they shouldn't use it as a sole resource, only a launching point.

Common Sense Media, an independent nonprofit, is dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing the trustworthy information, education, and independent voice they need to thrive in a world of media and technology.