

Identifying High-Quality Websites

Lesson Plan

Estimated time: 45 minutes

Essential Question: When can you trust what you find on the Web?

Learning Overview and Objectives

Overview: Students explore the idea that anyone can publish on the Web, so not all sites are equally trustworthy. They need to carefully evaluate the sites they use for research, and then decide which ones they can trust.

As a class, students discuss how print materials (books and newspaper or magazine articles) are published. Then they compare and contrast this process with publishing on the Web, learning that there are no built-in checks for accuracy or quality on the Web. Therefore, they must use their own criteria to judge the trustworthiness and usefulness of websites. After reviewing some evaluation criteria, students use a Website Test to judge informational sites.

objectives

Students will:

- Understand how the ease of publishing on the Web might affect how much they can trust the content of some sites
- Learn criteria that will help them evaluate websites
- Apply the criteria to a site to determine how trustworthy and useful it is

Materials and Preparation

Materials

- **Test Before You Trust Student Handout**
- **Test Before You Trust Student Handout – Teacher Version**

Preparation

- Review the **Test Before You Trust Student Handout – Teacher Version**. Preview the sites listed on the handout, and read through the discussion questions and the Website Test that students will perform.
- Copy the two-page **Test Before You Trust Student Handout**, one for each pair of students.

Parent Resources

- Send parents the **Evaluating Websites Parent Tip Sheet**
- Send parents the link to the **Wikipedia Parent Video Tip**

Key Vocabulary

- **Evaluate:** To carefully examine something to figure out its value
- **Trustworthy:** Accurate and dependable
- **Criteria:** Standards on which you base a judgment or decision
- **Community (on the Web):** Group of people who are connected through a website, often working on a common project
- **Site Map:** A list of the webpages on a website

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teaching plans

Introduce

Have students name some websites they often use when they write reports on an assigned subject.

Sample responses:

- *Awesome Library*
- *The Library of Congress*
- *Other primary sources*
- *Wikipedia*

ASK *How do you know if you can trust the information you find on the sites you named?*

Sample responses:

- *Everyone uses it*
- *It sounds right*
- *My teachers/parents told me to use it*
- *I got there from a link on another site*

EXPLAIN to students that it can be hard to tell when to trust the information they find on a website. In this lesson, they are going to learn some ways to evaluate whether a specific website is a trustworthy source of information.

Teach 1: Can Anyone Be an Author?

REVIEW the Key Vocabulary with students.

INTRODUCE students to the idea that the Web has made it easy for anyone to become an “author” and “publish” information for other people to read.

ASK

What kinds of people would you expect to write a book about endangered species in Australia?

Sample responses:

- *Wildlife biologist*
- *Zoologist*
- *Expert on Australian animals*
- *Someone who has spent time in Australia studying wildlife*
- *Aboriginal people who know about the local wildlife*

What kinds of people might write an article about a new health care law just passed by Congress?

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Sample responses:

- *Health care experts*
- *Doctors*
- *Political scientists*
- *Reporters who cover health care*
- *Reporters in Washington who write about Congress*

Next, ask students what they think might happen if they wrote a book about endangered species in Australia. Would a book publisher be likely to publish it? What if they wrote an article about a new health care law? Do they think a major newspaper would print the article? What if they wanted to post the same article on the Web? Could they do it?

DISCUSS with students how publishing printed material (newspapers, magazines, books) is different from publishing on the Web. **EXPLAIN:**

Although many websites are written by people with expertise on a particular topic, this isn't always the case throughout the Web. Sometimes people who create or post on blogs do not have a background in the subject matter, and there is no editor to hold them to a high standard. By contrast, most respected book publishers and newspaper editors look for authors who know a lot about their subjects. They also have skilled editors and fact checkers who review the information in these publications for mistakes. To recap, people who create or post on blogs and other websites are not necessarily experts in the subject. Their "facts" may not be true. They often don't fix errors when some are found. They may pretend that their opinions are facts. They may even choose to include unkind or harmful statements.

REMIND students that the standards for publication on the Web are getting higher every day. Explain:

While there are generally fewer rules about what can and can't be published on the Web, there are a growing number of sites that have high standards for publishing information. Therefore, though it is important to use a critical eye when looking at websites, you shouldn't automatically assume that online information is incorrect or of lesser quality than information in books or newspapers.

INVITE students to name an article they might want to write for a school magazine or a website for kids. Are they qualified to be authors of that article? Why or why not? Explain to students that to be a reliable author, they don't need to have advanced degrees or important jobs. They just need to know a lot about their subject, have trustworthy sources of information on their subject, and check their facts carefully.

Teach 2: Test Before You Trust

DIVIDE students into pairs. If your class has access to a limited number of computers, you may assign two or more pairs to work at the same computer and look at the same website; each pair should complete its own handout.

DISTRIBUTE the **Test Before You Trust Student Handout**. Refer to the **Test Before You Trust Student**



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Handout – Teacher Version for instructions on how to guide students through this part of the lesson. Students will evaluate assigned websites based on a 30-point test, then score their sites and discuss the results.

REVISIT the question you discussed in the introduction to the lesson after students have completed the activity.

ASK

How do you know whether you can trust the information you find on a website?

Sample responses:

- *The author is an expert and received awards*
- *The site is run by a respected organization or type of website (e.g., .gov, .edu)*
- *It comes from a well-known newspaper*
- *I got there from a link on another site that I trust*

Wrap Up and Assess

You can use these questions to assess your students’ understanding of the lesson objectives.

ASK

- *Why should you be careful to evaluate websites before using their information in research projects? (Anyone can publish material of any quality on the Web.)*
- *Which of the questions in the Website Test do you think are most important? Why? (Students should support their answers.)*

DISCUSS with students how using the Website Test to evaluate sites might make them better researchers. Help students understand that it will keep them from making mistakes. If their sources are reliable, then their research projects won’t contain inaccurate information.

REFLECT with students how what they have learned might apply to other Web browsing, and not just their school research. Could they “test” a site about a singer they like, or a sport they play?



Extension Activity

Students pretend they are editors and create rules for Web publishing. Tell students they run a new online Math Homework Help website for kids. Their job is to find the best websites for kids to help with math homework. It is important that they choose quality sites, because students will be using them to complete assignments for class. In small groups, students brainstorm about the criteria they would use to evaluate these websites. Each group then uses the criteria they have created to select three top sites. Finally, each group must present the websites they found and the criteria they used to select those websites.



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Homework

Students write a short research paper on the subject of year-round education. They should use one site that was evaluated in class and one site that was not and appears to be of low quality. When they write their papers, they should keep track of which facts came from each site, comparing and contrasting them to determine which site seems to provide higher-quality information. When they are finished, they should teach their parents about how to identify a high-quality website.

Alignment with Standards - National Educational Technology Standards for Students[®] 2007

(Source: International Society for Technology in Education, 2007)

3. Research and Information Fluency

- b. locate, organize, analyze, evaluate, synthesize, and ethically use information from a variety of sources and media
- c. evaluate and select information sources and digital tools based on the appropriateness to specific tasks
- d. process data and report results

4. Critical Thinking, Problem Solving and Decision Making

- c. collect and analyze data to identify solutions and/or make informed decisions

