

Research Writing

Reliability of Online Sources

Common Core Standards

Writing—Text Types and Purposes, W.3.2–W.12.2; Production and Distribution of Writing, W.3.4–W.6.4; W.3.5–W.6.5; W.3.6–W.6.6; Research to Build and Present Knowledge, W.3.7–W.7.7 and W.3.8–W.7.8

Speaking and Listening—Comprehension and Collaboration, SL.3.1–12.1

Online research has become increasingly common, even if it's just to look up directions to a new restaurant or to find out what to do about a bee sting. But not all online sources are equally useful and reliable, especially for academic research. In this activity, students will practice evaluating online sources for reliability. Note that if your class cannot do online research at school, you will need to do some research for them and prepare printouts for them to work on. You might also consider having students conduct online research at home with their parents' help. Students can then bring in their own printouts.

Explain to your students that while some information online is correct and very useful, other information can be incorrect or may just be people's personal opinions. Explain that there is a big difference between the website of a museum or university and cousin Freddy's blog. In addition, some sites have nothing to do with what students are researching or are unpleasant or even offensive.

Have students use research topics that will benefit whatever research and writing projects they are currently working on for class—or ask them to brainstorm new topics within the parameters that will be most productive and best suit your purposes. Before they start their research, discuss the following chart, provided on the first of two student activity pages. Ask students to think of examples of online sites they've seen and decide how many points they would earn on this scale from 1 to 10.

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| 0 points | Personal blogs where people say mean, hateful things |
| 1 point | Sites that sell products, most social media sites (like Facebook), positive personal blogs |
| 2–5 points | Well-regarded, long-established blogs of opinion makers and knowledgeable amateurs (people who study something on their own a lot); Wikipedia and About.com; school or school district and teacher websites (These sites can vary widely in quality.) |
| 6–8 points | Certain news, TV channel, and organization sites, such as National Geographic, PBS, the History Channel, the sites of specific Native American tribes, the Red Cross, etc.; state board of education sites; historical society sites |
| 9–10 points | Most university, museum, and government websites; respected encyclopedias such as Britannica; highly respected experts in certain fields |

Introduce the idea of *bias* to your students. Explain that sites that may look impressive sometimes have very strong ideas and want people to think a certain way. This is called bias. Students need to be smart and careful about the reliability of online research sources. Discuss each item in the chart with your class. For example, how will students distinguish between a knowledgeable amateur and a highly respected expert online? Why aren't *all* news sites listed in the 6–8 point range? Put the following sample sites on the board for your students to consider before they get started on their own topics:

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- Lewis and Clark, PBS site
- Lewis and Clark, created by Lisa, David, Melanie, and Julian (school site: class project)
- Lewis and Clark's Historic Trail, Yankton Daily Press and Dakotan
- Lewis and Clark Expedition, Wikipedia
- Lewis and Clark, National Park Service
- What did Clark do for the Lewis and Clark expedition? (Answers.com)
- Lewis and Clark College, Portland, Oregon

Point out that some sites are perfectly good in their own right, but aren't exactly on topic for the research students are doing. The Lewis and Clark College site is not really about the Lewis and Clark expedition, for example. One helpful tip for judging a site is to read the "About Us" or "About This Site" page. Students can also look at references and links when they are available on a site to see if they seem useful and impressive.

If you have the equipment, demonstrate how to search for a topic online using a search term such as "Oklahoma" and/or "Oklahoma history." Take a little time to discuss what makes a good search term. Like topics, search terms can be too big or too small. As your students conduct online research on their topics, they will be filling out the "Online Research" activity page. This means they will record

information about the sites they find. They should find at least six sites for this assignment. Students should also print out the sources they find (usually articles, fact sheets, or interviews). Then they can decide which of their sources are the best and indicate that on the activity page, with a brief explanation about their top picks. Let students know that in addition to being reliable, the best sources will have specific, interesting information about your students' topics.

Follow up on this task by having students write essays incorporating at least one quote or paraphrase from each of their top three sources to support their ideas. Model quoting and paraphrasing and have students practice on class samples first. You will also need to distribute examples of resource lists (bibliographies) and show students how to use the basic format.

Give students time to get feedback from a partner or small group before revising. Make sure students focus on content development, adding details and clarification rather than simply proofreading (correcting a few spelling and grammatical errors). After students have revised and you have checked their work, they should type up their writing on the computer. Then students can share their work with the class, explaining how they used their best sources to support their ideas about their topics.

Name: _____

Date: _____

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Using Sources Online Research

Use the following chart to judge the sources you find online as you look for more information about your history topic. You will need to find at least five sources. When you have rated and described your sources, answer the question at the bottom of the next page.

- 0 points** Personal blogs where people say mean, hateful things
- 1 point** Sites that sell products; most social media sites (like Facebook) and personal blogs
- 2–5 points** Well-regarded, long-established blogs of opinion makers and knowledgeable amateurs (people who study something on their own a lot); Wikipedia and About.com; public school or school district and teacher websites (These sites can vary widely in quality.)
- 6–8 points** Certain news, TV channel, and organization sites, such as National Geographic, PBS, the History Channel, the sites of specific Native American tribes, the Red Cross, etc.; state board of education sites; historical society sites
- 9–10 points** Most university, museum, and government websites; respected encyclopedias such as Britannica; highly respected experts in certain fields

Source #1 _____ Rating _____

Why this source is helpful _____

Source #2 _____ Rating _____

Why this source is helpful _____

Source #3 _____ Rating _____

Why this source is helpful _____

Name: _____

Date: _____

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Source #4 _____ Rating _____

Why this source is helpful _____

Source #5 _____ Rating _____

Why this source is helpful _____

Source #6 _____ Rating _____

Why this source is helpful _____

Which 2–3 sources are the best? Why?
