Search blog

How to Help Students Select Digital Tools and Resources

Students are heading to the internet to conduct academic research and complete school assignments, but they may not be finding the resources they need. Here are some tips to help explain why the digital research tools in your library may be more effective

23 September 2021

When students need to do research for a school assignment, they usually head straight to their favorite internet search engines on account of their familiarity and ease-of-access. After all, when students want to look up the latest in pop culture, where else do they go? A study by Jingjing Liu et. al. shows that even undergraduate and graduate students — perhaps the most seasoned researchers at the student level — still name internet search engines as their first choice for research [1].

However, while search engines may be the quickest way to find the closest Starbucks, they are not always the most effective way to find dependable information from trusted sources — especially for academic use. Many state-specific and Common Core standards require students to learn how to identify and search for reliable digital sources; however, user research shows that students are often basic researchers with minimalistic skills. The abundance of blogs, wikis, articles, videos and websites returned by a popular search engine may be difficult to navigate and often leads to student frustration when searching for trustworthy sources.

Here are some key points to help you explain to students why they should be cautious about using websites found through search engines to conduct academic research:

1. There are no standards for information found online. It could be written by anyone. How do you rate someone's expertise online?
2. The content may not be checked for accuracy or could be intentionally posted as "fake news."
3. General sites may contain biased information or click-bait articles that lead to a paid site.
4. Some sponsors pay to have information published in a certain way, even on seemingly credible sites.
5. The website might not be updated, meaning the details may be outdated.
6. It is not professional or academic to share information in an uncontrolled environment where anybody can post or comment.

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Inform your students about the importance of trustworthiness and how to identify reliable resources. Here is a list of questions your students should ask when evaluating digital resources:

1. Does the article have the author's name and his/her title, institution or skill level?
2. Does the content have a reputable publisher's name and/or contact information on it?
3. Is there an article or resource date? Does it include information on when it was last updated?
4. Is the content affiliated with your library or institution?
5. Does the content indicate that it is peer-reviewed or refereed?
6. Is the text well-organized, professional and suited to your research needs?
7. Does the text suggest a particular author bias that may impact the credibility of the information?
8. Does the website have a link to an About/Home page for more information on the publisher?
9. Does the website indicate any financial stake (e.g., sponsors) that would lead it to publish information from a certain perspective?

Encourage your students to conduct their research primarily using library resources, and take advantage of EBSCO's library website tool, **Stacks**, to provide access to all the reliable, trustworthy resources in your library holdings. With Stacks, students can access digital content from school or home, meaning they can always use valuable library resources to complete their assignments. All print items and digital collections can be discovered with one search box –– without the hassle of sifting through unreliable sites.

Stacks is a web-based content management system (CMS) that provides everything you need to create and manage your digital research experience. Feel confident with top-notch features and technology, including ***EBSCO Discovery Service**™* integration.

[1] 70 percent of search tasks assigned to a group of college students were conducted on internet sources as opposed to library sources. Even tasks classified as academic, scholarly and requiring an advanced knowledge base were still mainly conducted on internet search engines (48 internet, 29 library resources consulted). For more information and references to other studies with similar findings, see: Liu et. Al., 2018. Search systems and their features: What college students use to find and save information. Library & Information Science Research, Vol. 40, no. 2: 118-124.

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