

Web Literacy

“Write a biography of Thomas Edison.” “Make a poster showing the exports of Chile.” School projects take research.

Your middle schooler may love the Internet, but can he find accurate information for homework assignments and projects? Share these tools and tips to help him learn where to search, what to look for, and how to recognize the best information on the Web.



Search engines

Different kinds of search engines will give your child different results. Have him try these.

General search engines

Does your youngster have a favorite search engine? If he always goes straight to Google (www.google.com) or Yahoo (www.yahoo.com), suggest that he explore a few others to see if he finds one he likes better. Quintura (www.quintura.com), for instance, is a “visual” engine. It shows results in two formats: a straightforward list, and a “cloud” of related words that shift and change as your child moves his mouse over them. He may also want to try Ask (www.ask.com), Cuil (www.cuil.com), MSN Live Search (www.live.com), and AltaVista (www.altavista.com).

Metasearch engines

Your middle schooler may be surprised to learn that an engine doesn’t search the entire Internet. Luckily,

he can search several engines at once with a single click in a metasearch engine. You might suggest PolyMeta (www.polymeta.com), Zuula (www.zuula.com), Info (www.info.com), or Meta-Crawler (www.metacrawler.com).

Specialty search engines

Some engines cover one topic exclusively. To find one of these, your youngster should type his subject and “search engine” into a regular engine. For instance, “science search engine” will give him www.scirus.com, and “agriculture search engine” leads to www.agrisurf.com.

Search strategies

If your child uses the first few links that appear in a search, she may miss out on other great sites. Encourage her to look deeper with these tips:

- List questions. What exactly does your middle grader want to know about her topic? Suggest that she come up with specific questions. *Examples:* “What causes volcanoes to erupt?” “How many volcanoes are in the United States?” “What is lava made of?” Then, she can type those specific questions into a search engine.

- Let a search engine automatically narrow a topic. For instance, typing “volcanoes” into Yahoo will give your child a drop-down box with subtopics like “active volcanoes,” “Hawaii volcanoes,” and “types of volcanoes.” Other engines, like Ask and Cuil, offer a sidebar with related categories, subtopics, or search terms. Your youngster can keep narrowing down her search until she finds exactly what she’s looking for.

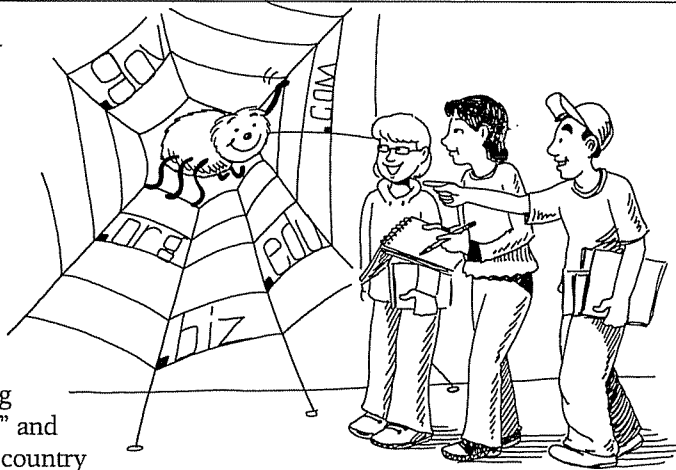


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Safety Note: Be sure your middle grader practices safe Internet surfing. Remind him never to give out personal information that could identify him, such as his last name, address, phone number, or school. You can use the parental controls that come with your browser to help ensure safe surfing, and review each site to determine its appropriateness for your child.

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■ Explore other search features. For example, there's usually an "advanced search" or "options" link that will let your middle grader request sites from a particular country or source (news story, journal article, blog). She can also specify sites that don't include particular words. If she's searching for "Madagascar volcanoes" and wants sites only about the country and not about a movie, she would type "Madagascar volcanoes -movie" (attach a minus sign to the word you want left out).



Citing Internet Sources

Online information should be treated just like material in books. Remind your child that it is plagiarism to copy word-for-word. Also, he must list sources for information other than common knowledge (example: Washington, DC, is the capital of the United States). He should ask his teacher how she wants Web pages to be cited.

■ Many children begin their research on Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.com). It's a collaborative Web site, or "wiki," that is written and edited by users. Since anyone in the world can add to Wikipedia, remind your youngster to always check the facts she finds there. She can also use the references and links at the bottom of each Wikipedia entry to do more research.

■ If your child isn't sure what her topic will be, a Web directory might be a smart place to start. This is a collection of sites organized into categories. For example, KidsClick! (www.kidsclick.org) has headings such as "Weird & Mysterious" and "Machines & Transportation." After reading through the list, your middle schooler might decide to research UFOs or robots. Other directories to try include <http://lii.org>, www.awesomelibrary.org, and www.ipl.org.

Evaluating information

The Internet contains so much information that it can be difficult to know which sites are reliable. These tips can help your child find trustworthy information:

■ Look at the URL. Educational organizations (.edu) and government agencies (.gov) are usually reliable Web sources. Commercial Web sites (.com), nonprofit organizations (.org), and small business sites (.biz) can also have legitimate information. But your youngster will need to evaluate them more carefully. He can search just for URLs ending in .gov or .edu by using an engine's "advanced search" feature. Or he can add "site:.gov" (no space between the colon and the period) before the search terms. For instance, typing "site:.gov recycling" will pull up government agency sites about recycling.

■ Learn about the person or organization behind a Web site. A link at the bottom of the page may give credentials (books a person has published, organizations a group is affiliated with). Urge your child to avoid "sponsored links" on search engines. These paid advertisements usually appear in a shaded box at the top of the page or in their own column.

■ Check the date. Scan the page to find out when it was last updated. There may be a dateline at the top of an article or a copyright date at the bottom of the site.

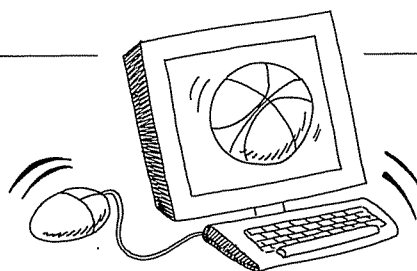
Tip: Remind your child to double-check all information. He should always verify facts by looking them up on more than one site.



Web fun

Your child can practice searching the Web and reading critically with these activities for the whole family:

■ Play the Trivial Pursuit board game with a twist. Instead of competing to see how much contestants know, test your research skills. For each question she's asked, a player gets three to five minutes to look up the answer online.



■ Make a Web quest. Choose a topic that interests everyone (basketball,

camping). Ask each person to find a good Web site about the subject and make up three questions that can be answered with information from the site. Put all the questions in a word-processing document, and work together to find the answers. *Variation:* Look for pre-made Web quests online at sites like www.webquest.org.

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