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Using the Internet As a Study Tool

*Ideas to Help Your Child
Do Better in School*



Homework & Study Skills Series

THE
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The Internet may be a gold mine when it comes to gathering information for homework and school projects, but that doesn't mean everything your child finds there is gold!

The key to uncovering accurate information online is to be *smart* and *savvy* about using the Internet as a study tool. And that's where this booklet comes in.

You'll learn tips for helping your child avoid online "trash" while uncovering the "treasure," along with ideas for using the Internet to improve—or even overhaul—your child's study habits.

Of course, the Internet isn't without its dangers, so you'll also learn ways to help your child stay safe online. And if you don't own a computer, this booklet has pointers on where your student might use one.

So read on to discover how best to maximize the power of the Internet. It can help maximize your child's performance at school!

Every child is unique, so we often use the singular pronoun. We'll alternate the use of "he" and "she" throughout this booklet.

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Using the Internet for Research

Should you cite that site?

What's the quickest way for your child to mess up an assignment or class project? Build it around bogus information from an iffy website! It's not just frustrating—it can seriously damage his grades.

To gauge whether the site he's about to cite is on the up-and-up, have him ask himself:



- **Is it selling something?** Is the website pushing a product, service or political/social/religious viewpoint? Then it has a bias. That doesn't necessarily mean it contains false information. But the information it's providing may be incomplete or one-sided. Keep that in mind.
- **Who's behind it?** Do articles on the site have specific authors? Do those authors have credentials? Are there links to some of their other work? Credible sites tend to provide detailed—not sketchy—information about their contributors.
- **Is it current?** If the site includes information about a current topic, but that information is more than a couple of years old, your child should double-check its accuracy before citing it on an assignment. Don't let an out-of-date statistic ruin his next research paper!
- **Does it look professional?** If a website is extremely sloppy, chances are the information on it is sloppy, too. True, good looks don't guarantee good information, but a messy, typo-filled site doesn't exactly inspire confidence, either.
- **Does it just seem fishy?** Did he stumble on a website with too-good-to-be-true statistics or quotes that he can't find anywhere else? Move on! *Not being able to verify something via another source is a sure sign that a "fact" is really fiction.*

A word on wikis

What's a wiki? The term *wiki* comes from the Hawaiian word for *fast*. A *wiki* is a big online database, usually open to the public—such as Wikipedia—where users can read, edit and add content. Think of wikis as huge online reference books where everyone gets to be a contributor.

In other words, anyone can access most wikis—and anyone can modify them. And that's the catch. People are free to add whatever they want to a wiki—including spam or fake "facts." So remind your child to be careful about citing information she finds there.

It's not that wikis can't be valuable resources. They can. In fact, Wikipedia often gets high marks for accuracy.

But if she digs up a suspicious tidbit on a wiki that can't be confirmed elsewhere? Exit that window!

Beware of blogs

If the Internet is an endless rainbow of information, blogs are its gray area. A *blog* (short for *weblog*) is an online log or journal. Although many blogs are slick and professional, others are clunky and amateurish.

And since anyone and everyone (whether they're knowledgeable or not) can create a blog on any topic, tell your child to proceed with caution when using information she finds on them.

Make sure your child verifies the information she gets from blogs via other, *non-blog* sources. She should always check the credentials of the blogger to make sure there's some level of expertise there.



A biologist who blogs about cell division may offer interesting theories your child can explore in her next science-fair project.

But some guy blogging about an alien invasion (and the cover-up that followed) during the War of 1812? She should leave him out of her next history essay!

How do you cite a website?

If your child's teacher asks that he cite Internet sources in a certain way, he should do it. But if the format is left up in the air, follow the Modern Language Association's guidelines for citing online articles.

According to MLA format, online citations should include:

- The author's name.
- The title of the article.
- The name of the website in italics.
- The publisher of the website. If none is given, write "n.p." for "no publisher."
- The date the article was written. If none is given, write "n.d." for "no date."
- "Web" to indicate that it's an online source.
- The date the site was accessed.

Here's a sample MLA citation:

Mary Jones. "How to Format a Term Paper." *eStudent.com*. eStudent, 31 July 2011. Web. 5 March 2011.

Avoiding plagiarism

With ideas flying around the Internet at lightning speed, it can be tough for your child to recall which piece of information came from which site or even where that site got its information.



But insist that she keep track, anyway. If she doesn't, she's in danger of plagiarizing—even inadvertently.

Simply put, plagiarism is not giving credit where it's due. If your child uses an idea, quote or entire passage from a website, but doesn't say so, she's plagiarizing.

To help her avoid it, encourage her to:

- **Make a list** of the sites she uses for a particular project.
- **Avoid copying and pasting** text directly from a site to her paper.
- **Read over her work carefully** to look for things that may need sourcing.
- **Err on the side of caution.** It's better to cite a source unnecessarily than to accidentally plagiarize.



Other Ways to Use the Internet for Studying

Finding homework help online

There are countless sites your child can turn to if he needs help with his schoolwork or wants to take a sample test, but be sure to keep tabs on which ones he's visiting.

Many sites (some free, some not) will do his work for him by answering his questions outright. (He may love the idea, but you shouldn't!)

Have him show you which sites he visits when he's stuck on a problem. Explore them together, or look for others to try. Just plugging "homework help" into a search engine can be a good place to start.

Make it clear that it's never okay to purchase a paper online. Not only is it the definition of cheating, but surveys show that these papers are often entirely plagiarized. They're bad news!

Instead, insist that your child do his own Internet research and come by his information honestly. There are many subject-specific sites available. Have your child check with his teachers for their recommendations.

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While web addresses frequently change, here are some examples of sites he might find helpful:

Science

- The MadSci Network (www.madsci.org)
- Strange Matter (www.strangematterexhibit.com)
- Bill Nye the Science Guy (www.billnye.com)
- NASA (www.nasa.gov)
- Reeko's Mad Scientist Lab (www.spartechsoftware.com/reeko)

Social Studies

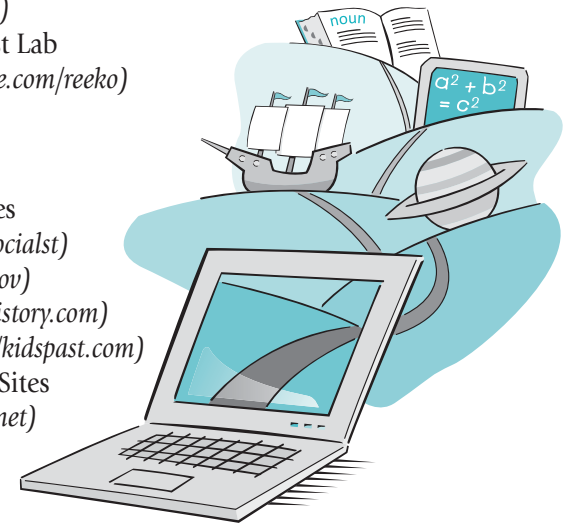
- Social Studies Sources (www.indiana.edu/~socialst)
- Kids.gov (www.kids.gov)
- History.com (www.history.com)
- KidsPast.com (<http://kidspast.com>)
- Best of History Web Sites (www.besthistorysites.net)

Math

- Math Playground (www.mathplayground.com)
- S.O.S. Mathematics (www.sosmath.com)
- WebMath (www.webmath.com)
- CoolMath.com (www.coolmath.com)

Language Arts/English

- Project Gutenberg (www.gutenberg.org)
- The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation (www.grammarbook.com)
- Teenspace (<http://teenspace.cincinnati.library.org/books>)
- Merriam-Webster Online (www.merriam-webster.com)



Staying organized with online tools



If your child prefers keyboards to pens, she's probably not too gung-ho about keeping track of assignments and projects on paper. Luckily, she doesn't have to.

There are plenty of sites that can help her stay organized electronically, and many of them are free. Some will even send her a text or email anytime a deadline or test approaches. Pretty cool!

Examples of free sites that offer help for staying organized include:

- **Google Calendar** (www.google.com/intl/en/googlecalendar/about.html)
- **Famundo** (www.famundo.com)
- **Cozi** (www.cozi.com)
- **MyHomePoint** (www.myhomepoint.com)
- **Yahoo! Calendar** (<http://calendar.yahoo.com>)

Your child should begin her "quest to stay organized," however, by first checking out the school's website. Some of the best ones include:

- A school-wide calendar.
- An online "homework hotline" with links to specific classes.
- Individual teachers' pages or blogs.
- A schedule of standardized tests being given during the year.
- The dates of upcoming holidays, half days and closings.
- Links to other student-friendly sites.



Are online study groups a good idea?

Should your child study online—via instant message, chat, a social-networking site or a school-sponsored forum—with friends or fellow students? It depends.

Before she joins (or creates) an online study group, have her ask herself:

- **Am I a social learner?** If she thrives on the back-and-forth of interactive study sessions, then an online group may be fine. But if she needs quiet and solitude when studying, going solo may be a better idea.
- **Am I disciplined?** Be honest: Can she stay focused during an online study session? Or will she quickly find herself forwarding funny links to everyone? If she suspects she'll give in to temptation but still wants to study with others, suggest a traditional face-to-face group instead.
- **Do I have the time?** The most successful study groups are the ones that meet regularly. If her schedule is too crazy to make time for an online group, she may need to shelve the idea until things settle down.
- **Am I a good fit for this group?** It's critical that members of the group be in the same (or very similar) courses at school. It also helps if they're all motivated to do well in class. If your child is a star among slackers—or a slacker among stars—the study group may not benefit anyone.



No Computer at Home?

Your child might be expected to use the Internet for school assignments whether you own a computer or not. He may be able to access the Internet for free:

- **At school.** Start by talking to his teachers or the media center specialist. Find out if the school's computers can be used before or after class. If they can't, ask if your child could be given class time to use a computer for any project that requires one.
- **At a community center.** Youth-oriented programs (including after-school programs) may include computer time. Find out if such a program exists in your area. Your child's school may have contact information.
- **At the public library.** Ask the librarian about the policies on computer usage. Is there a time limit? Are there fees to print pages? Also find out the best times to come. Some days are likely to be busier than others.

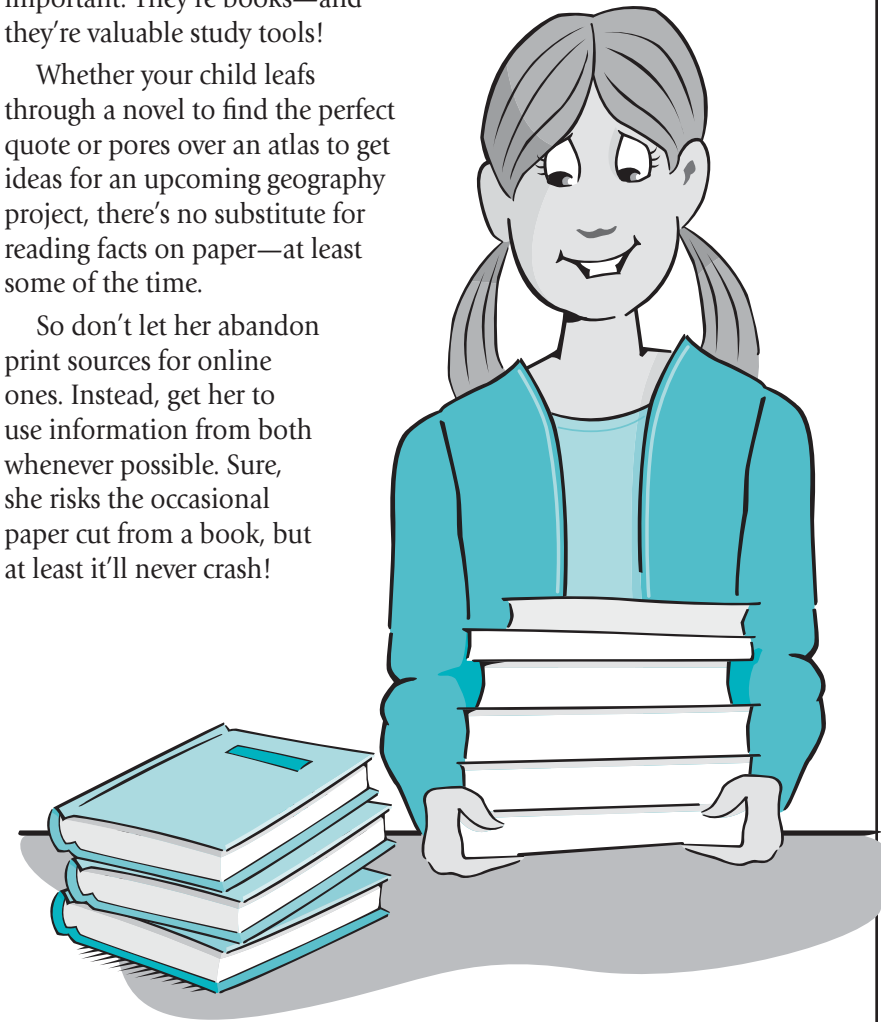
If you and your child decide to use the library's computers but have trouble navigating the Internet, ask the librarian for help. Cyberspace can be a confusing place, and *there's no shame in admitting you don't know your way around*. Remember: Librarians are there to help. So let them!

Don't Abandon Books!

They don't beep, flash or come with apps, but they're still important. They're books—and they're valuable study tools!

Whether your child leafs through a novel to find the perfect quote or pores over an atlas to get ideas for an upcoming geography project, there's no substitute for reading facts on paper—at least some of the time.

So don't let her abandon print sources for online ones. Instead, get her to use information from both whenever possible. Sure, she risks the occasional paper cut from a book, but at least it'll never crash!



Online Safety

Keeping your child safe online

Your child may have more Internet experience than you do, but you have more *life* experience. And no matter how comfortable he is online, there are real dangers in cyberspace. Part of your job is to help him avoid those dangers.

To keep your child safe while he's online, whether it's for school or for fun:

- **Set time limits.** Experts recommend no more than two hours of non-school-related "screen time" each day, which includes time spent on video games and other entertainment media.
- **Keep the computer out in the open.** Put it in the family room or kitchen, not in his bedroom.
- **Use filtering software.** It's no substitute for supervision, but parental-control software can help block X-rated sites and ads.
- **Insist he take the pledge.** Turn to page 12 for a list of things your child should agree to do and *not* do online.



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What is cyberbullying?

Thanks to technology, bullying has moved from the schoolyard to cyberspace. Some kids create entire websites devoted to making fun of others. They post mean things on peers' social-networking accounts (such as Facebook). They even trick kids into revealing private information and then forward it to others.

Whether it happens via text, instant message (IM), email or website, cyberbullying is a real issue. So if you notice your child becoming sad or withdrawn, or if she suddenly stops using the computer, talk to her.

If it turns out your child is being bullied online:

- **Be there for her** and let her know she can always come to you with her problems.
- **Remind her *never* to respond** to online taunts. It only encourages the bully.
- **Keep a record** of anything she receives from the cyberbully. Print out threatening emails or online posts.
- **Tell her teachers, counselor or principal** what's happening.
- **Contact the police** if your child feels threatened or unsafe.



Create a family email account

Some helpful-for-homework sites require users to register before accessing content. But if you'd prefer your child not give out his personal email address, set up a family email account.

Here's how:

- **Select a free email provider** (such as Yahoo, Hotmail or Gmail).
- **Choose an address** (e.g., noname@freemail.com).
- **Create a password** you'll all remember. Write it down!
- **Tell your child** to always use this account when registering with a site.

By using one email address for all school-related websites, you'll have the same access that your child has to any updates or alerts.

You'll also be able to see any spam (unwanted messages and/or ads) that comes through. And you'll be notified if a previously free site is planning to start charging fees.



Take the pledge

Commit to staying safe and responsible online! Together with your child, review and sign this pledge. Then post it near your computer.

1. **I promise NOT** to post personal information—like my full name or home address—anywhere online.
2. **I promise** to tell a parent **IMMEDIATELY** if I come across anything scary or threatening online.
3. **I promise NOT** to post pictures of myself, my family or my friends online without permission from a parent.
4. **I promise** to **CLOSE** the browser right away if I see pornography.
5. **I promise NEVER** to respond to mean or threatening messages and to tell a parent if I receive one.
6. **I promise NEVER** to set up a face-to-face meeting with someone I meet online.
7. **I promise** to follow the **SCHOOL POLICIES** on computer use.

Child _____ Date _____

Parent _____ Date _____

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Studying is one your child's main responsibilities in school. The Internet, with its vast resources, is an important tool for helping your child study, learn and navigate the road toward academic success.

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