How to use the Internet for school

Dear Leanna: My son got a D on a paper because he used only Wikipedia as a source. The teacher wrote “need to master search skills!”

Answer: A recent survey by Internet librarian FindingDulcinea.com shows that most students can’t develop a sound research strategy or effectively evaluate Internet content. They type whole questions into the search box and rely heavily on the first few search results, particularly Wikipedia.

Mark Moran, Finding-Dulcinea’s founder, says that while Wikipedia can be useful for pre-research, Wikipedia itself says it should not be relied upon for a school paper.

There are many ways to effectively search online, Moran says:

* First, decide where to search. Many schools offer databases that may lead to credible information more quickly than any search engine. As for the Internet, Moran suggests asking a teacher to suggest trustworthy sites and bookmark them.

* Always use more than one search engine, advises Moran. “Try a meta-search engine, such as Zuula, which searches several search engines at once. Or use a specialty search engine … Sweet Search.com searches only 35,000 sites … approved by research experts.”

* Dig deep. Moran says the best resources are sometimes buried. Find them, and it will be a lot easier to write your paper. One tool, Yolink Education.com, works like “X-ray vision” to help a user browse through a long list of search results without opening them.

* Plan your research. “Rewrite the assignment in your own words. Next, brainstorm a list of key search terms, using nouns. Search them in combinations of two or three,” Moran advises.

* Use special search functions; quotation marks are especially powerful.

* Evaluate your search results. Moran says Internet research is like detective work; you have to learn which sources to trust, and must verify critical information with several sources.

* Consider the ads on the site. Are they mixed in with the content? Just as TV infomercials are ads disguised as programs, some sites create content that is intended only to sell you something.

* Check dates of sources, says Moran. A year ago, experts feared the H1N1 virus would create a global pandemic. So far, it has not. If you wrote a paper about H1N1 that relied on a 2009 news report, your paper would be grossly inaccurate. Use a news search engine, or use the current year as a search term. Writing about a historic topic? Include primary source documents such as newspaper accounts written at the time of the event.

* DO YOU HAVE A QUESTION ABOUT YOUR CHILD’S EDUCATION? E-MAIL IT TO LEANNA@APLUSADVICE.COM.

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