

Using websites for homework

There are millions of websites on the Internet and new sites are being added every day. Your child's school may suggest some websites as a starting point to use for homework but it will not be long before the wider world of the web will call out to be explored – how will you know which sites are worth spending time on?

How to evaluate a website

Here are some key points for evaluating whether a website will be really useful or not:

- Relevance – is the information at the right level and depth for your child, and will they be able to read the text easily?
- Quality – does the information seem to be accurate, up-to-date and well presented?
- Ease of use – if the site is hard to move around or needs the latest plug-ins and a very fast connection it might become very frustrating for your child to use.
- Purpose – do the aims of the site seem to be mainly educational or commercial?
- Credibility – is it clear who is the author and who is the publisher of the site?

Being selective

It is easy to get carried away and bookmark dozens of sites for each subject your child is studying, but that could mean that they spend too much time wandering through those sites and not enough actually using the material they find. Try to restrict the number of sites and be guided by the lists compiled by the school and other respected bodies like subject associations. Parents Information Network (PIN) has a programme of evaluating educational websites for a number of subject areas and age ranges. You can also read the set of criteria used to evaluate those sites.

Intellectual Property

This is a term which describes the protection in law for people who design or create things including the content published on websites. It includes patents, trademarks and copyright and it is intended to prevent unauthorised use of such protected content. It is relevant to anyone who wants to use information they find on the Internet for educational or any other purpose as such unauthorised use can be a criminal offence (equivalent to theft).

Copyright issues

Just like the text in books and magazines, web pages are subject to copyright law. In fact, each page may contain several different copyrights if it contains text, music, graphics and so on. So, copying or printing out any content from a web page could be illegal, although it is not likely in the case of a single copy made for the purpose of private study. Most content on websites has been put there by the author for people to access freely, but you should look on the site for any copyright statement and seek permission from the copyright owner(s) if permission is not granted automatically. You should encourage your child to do the same. Most educational content can be used for individual study purposes without gaining permission, although its source should always be referenced (see section on 'Plagiarism and referencing sources').

Plagiarism and referencing sources

Plagiarism is the copying of ideas and works from another author and passing them off as your own. You should make sure that your child is aware that plagiarism is not only cheating but that, where a significant proportion of content is copied, there could be an illegal infringement of copyright. Children could be penalised by teachers or exam boards if they are found to have plagiarised content submitted as their own work. The best practice is for children to reference each source of information they use. It is a good idea to quote not only the author, but also the web page address and the date it was accessed.

How can I find out more?

Quality Information Checklist

The **Quick** site, produced by the Health Development Agency, gives a **Quality Information Checklist** to help children evaluate the quality of information they find on the Internet. Part of the site is aimed at teachers and part is aimed at children aged 9 to 11. It is well worth a visit by any family who will be searching for information online.

<http://www.quick.org.uk/>

McIntyre Library

This US library has produced a list of 10 criteria to consider in evaluating websites.

<http://www.uwec.edu/library/Guides/tencs.html>

Information Quality WWW Virtual Library

This web page contains links to other sites which have resources for evaluating information resources on the Internet.

<http://www.vuw.ac.nz/~agsmith/evaln/evaln.htm>

PIN website evaluations

On the Parents Information Network (PIN) site you can read how teachers and families rate websites and search through comprehensive listings of educational website evaluations.

<http://www.pin.org.uk/home/index.htm>

The Patent Office

The Patent Office has produced an Intellectual Property website with clear and detailed information on copyright.

<http://www.intellectual-property.gov.uk>