

How Teachers Can Help Students Understand Source Credibility



Because of the constant inundation of content we're all faced with today, it's more important than ever to teach your students about the importance of and the correct way to go about assessing the credibility of source materials, especially online.

For teachers, this must not be the job of one lesson, but an ongoing effort of researching and modeling throughout the year. Here's four things to consider when designing lessons to help your students to become savvy consumers of information.

Always ask who, what, when, where, and why?

With every source, students should be taught to think like a skeptic and ask questions about the content before accepting it as fact. Who produced the material is perhaps the most valuable clue, and a great place to start. Teach your students about the difference between scientific journals, newspapers, social media, and other sources. Ask them to consider how recent the information is. Where did it originate from? And, finally, what does the author(s) have to gain from putting forward the information? With experience and practice, students will find that this kind of evaluation becomes second nature—and doesn't take much time at all.

Follow search engine best practices

Today's students have grown up in a world where information is available on demand. Typing a few short words or a simple question into a search engine instantly produces thousands of results. That efficiency tends to lead students to favor only the top few results they see, even when they aren't the most relevant or reliable. Consider making classroom posters of two basic skills of the Internet: Google commands that can narrow down results to more credible sources ([here](#) is a good example, but there are plenty others), and what each top level web domain (the part of an Internet address after the period) means (for example, .edu denotes educational institutions, .gov follows government sites, etc). Simple, prominently placed reminders can help students follow smart search practices, and cut down on their likelihood of using non-credible sources.

Never rely on a single source

Too often, students rely on only one source of information before moving on. Teach the concepts of cross-referencing information by finding two less viable sources and having your students compare them. Then, find a more credible source to provide the truth and review the key differences from the first two articles. These days even unassailable facts are, well, assailable, so make the fact you use in this lesson as basic as possible.

Play the fact-check game

There are quite a few organizations out there that bill themselves as fact-checkers, some better than others. But the truth is that everyone should have the same set of skills, including students. Provide some age-appropriate source material (a political speech might be acceptable for high school students, but not elementary) and have the students verify what they heard or read. The team that disproves the most points (using credible sources) wins. This turns something they may consider boring or time-consuming into a worthwhile process.

Understanding how to identify credible sources is a critical skill for today's students, and a key aspect of [digital citizenship](#). Looking for more tips to help your students become outstanding online sleuths? Check out Education World's [Ultimate Guide to Teaching Source Credibility!](#)