

## Using Electronic Resources Appropriately

Today's generation of learners have been referred to as the "net generation" (Oblinger, 2005), and characterised as a highly IT-literate group for whom use of technology and the internet comes as second nature. Equally for these learners, more traditional means of research, such as going to the library to browse the bookshelves is completely alien.

Whilst the internet and associated technologies offer almost instantaneous access to a wealth of information to these learners, equally, key skills are necessary both to retrieve relevant information and critically evaluate sources presented. Most academic libraries run formalised programmes to assist students in finding and using good quality electronic resources, so your first port of call when researching a topic should be your library.

### Wikipedia

There has recently been some controversy regarding the use of Wikipedia as a tool for students to research their work, with some tutors in US schools and colleges banning its use (Cohen, 2007). As a starting point for researching a topic on the web Wikipedia is certainly an excellent resource, however students should be aware that as entries can be added and edited by any contributor no established quality control exists. Entries may contain inaccuracies, and in some cases may be entirely fabricated. Indeed tutors might like to suggest to their students that they use their wider research to either substantiate or disprove what they have read in their initial search via Wikipedia.

### Search engines

Equally, search engines such as Google or Yahoo can also be a good starting point for researching a topic, although the vast number of hits which are returned can be daunting. Thinking carefully about search terms, and simple tips such as using Boolean operators like OR and NOT (Google, for instance already includes the AND operator) and enclosing phrases in quotation marks will result in a narrower and more tailored search. Indeed Google provides a helpful list of search suggestions <http://www.google.co.uk/intl/en/help/refinesearch.html>

Nevertheless, using any search engine for researching a topic should be done with caution, as, quantity, does not necessarily denote quality.

Alternatively the Intute gateway provides access to various websites in a wide range of subject areas. As all materials added to this gateway are suggested by subject specialists, the resources available are of a consistently high standard.

### Electronic journals

It is highly likely that any academic institution's library or learning resource centre will subscribe to hundreds or thousands of full text peer reviewed electronic journals. Journals present the latest research in various subject areas and have been through a process of peer review which assures articles are of a certain standard and from key researchers in the field. Tutors or Subject Librarians will be able to recommend key journals in a particular subject area. Many electronic journals are available in collections such as Ingenta, Ebsco, Science Direct etc. Access to these resources may require a password, such as Athens.

### Finally...

It's important to be critical of all electronic sources located, especially those obtained using standard search engines. Learning how to evaluate sources, both in terms of relevancy to research topics, and also whether they offer reliable information is a valuable skill to develop. The Internet Detective tutorial is an excellent tool to assist with developing these skills.

### References:

- Athens*. Available at <http://www.athens.ac.uk> (Accessed: 16 November 2007).
- Cohen, N. (2007) 'A History department bans citing Wikipedia as a research source', *The New York Times*, 21 February. Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/21/education/21wikipedia.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/21/education/21wikipedia.html?_r=1&) (Accessed: 16 November 2007).
- Ebsco*. Available at: <http://ejournals.ebsco.com> (Accessed: 16 November 2007).
- Google*. Available at: <http://www.google.co.uk> (Accessed: 16 November 2007).
- Ingenta* Available at: <http://www.ingenta.com/> (Accessed: 16 November 2007).
- Internet detective*. Available at: <http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/detective/> (Accessed: 16 November 2007).
- Intute*. Available at: <http://www.intute.ac.uk> (Accessed: 16 November 2007).
- Oblinger, D. G. & Oblinger, J. L. (eds.) *Educating the net generation*. Educause [Online]. Available at: <http://www.educause.edu/educatingthenetgen/> (Accessed: 24 October 2007).
- Science Direct*. Available at: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/> (Accessed: 16 November 2007).
- Wikipedia*. Available at: <http://www.wikipedia.org/> (Accessed: 16 November 2007).
- Yahoo*. Available at: <http://www.yahoo.com/> (Accessed: 16 November 2007).

For details of more tip sheets in this series see [www.jiscpas.ac.uk](http://www.jiscpas.ac.uk)