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Writing Samples

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Key Points on Using the Internet for Research

The Internet has become an enormous and valuable tool for anyone engaging in research activities. The purpose of the present sample essay provided by Ultius is to discuss the use of the Internet for research, and more specifically to provide key points regarding how to use the Internet effectively for this purpose. The essay will begin with a brief overview of the history of the emergence of the contemporary Internet. Then, it will consider one of the key issues when using the Internet for research, which consists of evaluating sources for credibility. Then, it will discuss three specific examples of using the Internet for research: domain names, Wikipedia, and academic databases. By the end of the essay, the reader should have a good sense of how to use the Internet in an effective way for research purposes.

Overview of the Internet

The Internet has a long and complex history, not least because of disagreements regarding the very term "Internet" itself, and what legitimately qualifies as the Internet per se and what should instead be thought of as precursors. For example, the Internet Society has written the following: "The Internet has changed much in the two decades since it came into existence. It was conceived in the era of time-sharing but has survived into the era of personal computers, client-server and peer-to-peer computing, and the network computer. It was designed before LANs existed, but has accommodated that new network technology" (paragraph 24). The specific technical terms in that quotation do not matter for present purposes; the only point here would be that the Internet has undergone significant evolution over time. The Internet proper,

though, in a way that would still be recognized today, probably came into its own during the decade of the 1990s.

Among other things, the Internet has completely revolutionized the way that people do research. For example, even professional academic writers, such as the ones here at Ultius, seldom have any need to go visit physical libraries, anymore. And this would be because almost all the resources needed for doing academic work can now be found on the Internet, if one only knows where to look. This is part of a broader trend of libraries becoming relatively obsolete in modern times. As Siegler has written: "It's not hard to imagine a future where the majority of libraries cease to exist—at least as we currently know them. Not only are they being rendered obsolete in a digital world, the economics make *even less* sense" (paragraph 7). The Internet has thus clearly become a major research tool in the contemporary world. It is, however, worth discussing one of the main issues that emerge when doing research on the Internet: this is the issue of credibility.

The Issue of Credibility

Credibility is an important issue when citing sources within an academic research paper. As the Purdue Online Writing Lab has indicated: "Regardless of what type of sources you use, they must be credible. In other words, your sources must be reliable, accurate, and trustworthy" (paragraph 4). Essentially, academic papers generally require the writer to support ideas and contentions to appropriate sources from the relevant literature; and in a way, the quality of one's paper is only as good as the quality of the sources that have been used to support that paper. For example, if one wanted to make the argument that (say) the moon landing never happened, then one would probably not be able to find credible sources to support this thesis, although one would surely be able to find a great deal of fringe sources within the blogosphere.

A part of the charm of the Internet, of course, is its inherently democratic nature: pretty much anyone can generate content, and pretty much anything can be found (Best and Wade 255). But when writing an academic paper and using the Internet for serious research, this feature of the Internet becomes a kind of liability. This is because the researcher must make use of credible sources for his paper, he must take care to filter out the credible material from the non-credible material on the Internet. A vast number of websites, for example, merely contain random opinions from random people, and one cannot really produce a high-quality academic paper by relying on such material. Rather, one must know how to find the right sources that have been authored by people with right credentials. This would be the only way to make use of the Internet as a research tool in an effective manner.

Example 1: Domain Names

One great way to filter credible sources from non-credible sources on the Internet is to pay attention to domain names. As the University of Wisconsin has indicated: "Some domains, such as .com, .org, and .net can be purchased and used by any individual. However, the domain .edu is reserved for colleges and universities, while .gov denotes a government website" (paragraph 1). For instance, that quote itself has been cited from a .edu site, which generally means that the site has a high level of credibility. The .com domain generally tends to have the lowest level of credibility, due to the simple fact that anyone can obtain a .com URL and then proceed to write whatever they want on that webpage. In short, when it comes to academic quality and rigor, not all webpages on the Internet are created equal; and the effective researcher must have a good idea of how to parse the good ones from the bad ones. Paying attention to the domain name is one quick and general way to filter the information and figure out what and what not to cite in one's own academic paper.

There may be situations in which a professor may indicate that no websites at all should be used within an academic paper. To an extent, such a stance could be understood as a kind of overreaction against the heaps of useless and low-quality material that can be found on the Internet. The fact of the matter is that there is good material to be found on the Internet that can be used as legitimate sources for one's own academic paper. One must simply know where to look, and have some sense of the nature of the assignment at hand. For example, although .com websites are generally low quality in nature, there are surely exceptions to this rule: if one is writing a paper on current events, then one would probably want to cite newspaper articles, and almost all newspapers use the .com domain suffix. After knowing the basic rules for filtering sources by domain name, then, one must also make use of one's own intuitive sense to figure out what would and would not be an appropriate source for one's own work.

Example 2: Wikipedia

Wikipedia poses an interesting kind of puzzle: almost all researchers make use of this resource, but almost no one acknowledges doing so. Almost all professors tend to make a specific note against citing Wikipedia in academic papers. The severity of this bias is odd, given that Wikipedia is a very valuable research resource, especially when one is trying to obtain general background information on one's given subject matter. Moreover, as Chesney has pointed out based on empirical research, the accuracy and reliability of the information found on Wikipedia is actually very high (although there are of course also errors here and there). Many of the articles on Wikipedia provide information whose quality is on par with what one would find in any actual encyclopedia; and the bias against Wikipedia would thus seem to be based more on misunderstandings about the nature of the resource than on the actual quality of the information found in the resource.

Nevertheless, most current researchers are in fact expected to avoid citing Wikipedia in their own work. A good trick here is to simply scroll down to the bottom of a given Wikipedia page, where the references used for the Wikipedia article are themselves listed—and then to simply follow the links to those references. Again, Wikipedia articles in general have a high level of credibility; and this is because those articles themselves cite credible sources. So, one way to circumvent the taboo involved with citing Wikipedia articles in academic papers would be to simply cite the original sources that are cited by those articles themselves. In principle, there is nothing dishonest about this, if one gives proper credit to the original sources themselves, from which the main ideas or quotations are drawn. In short, one way or the other, Wikipedia is an indispensable tool when making use of the Internet for the purposes of research.

Example 3: Academic Databases

Academic databases contain sources of the highest quality, including actual journal articles from academic periodicals. Google Scholar is an academic database that is open to the entire public, although it can be somewhat difficult to find full-text versions of all the articles indexed within the databases: often, only the abstracts (or brief summaries at the beginnings of the articles) actually turn up. Depending on one's needs, this may well be enough. Other highly useful academic databases include JSTOR EBSOhost's Academic Search Complete. Access to these databases generally requires affiliation with an organization, but most universities and colleges give their students full access to them. Moreover, several public libraries also provide access to the databases. The present writer, for example, can simply use his credentials with the public library in the city of Austin, Texas to access several academic databases.

Online access to these databases is one great example of how the Internet has completely revolutionized the research process. In the past, researchers would have had to physically visit

the libraries where catalogues of academic journals are housed; and then they would have had to manually dig through the entire catalogue to find the specific articles that they needed. Now, all of the articles from all of the journals are literally at the researchers' fingertips, and a search for keywords can turn up the exact articles that the researchers are looking for. It is almost impossible to overstate the magnitude or significance of this change of for the practice of research, and it clearly shows how indispensable the Internet has now become as a tool for research. Moreover, this significance is only heightened when one bears in mind that through databases such as Google Books and Amazon, one now also has online access to a wide range of books as well, without ever needing to get up and make it across town or campus to visit the actual library.

Conclusion

In summary, the present essay has consisted of a discussion of key points on using the Internet for research. After briefly discussing the Internet itself, the essay went on to discuss the key issue of credibility, and then proceeded to consider several examples of using the Internet for research while keeping this issue in mind. A main theme that has emerged here is that the Internet has become vital for anyone interested in doing serious research, and that it is thus important for all students, researchers, and writers to learn how to use the Internet in an effective way toward this end. The issue of credibility of sources is a major one when doing this, due to the simple fact that there is so much material on the Internet, and that the material can be produced by practically anyone. However, one should surely not let oneself get daunted by that fact; rather, one should simply keep the points of this essay in mind, and move forward.

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