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INTERNET INK/MIKE REILLEY

Getting Plugged In

How Teachers Can Weave the Web into Reporting
Classes

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Editor's note: This is the first of a two-part series on teaching online resources by [Mike Reilley](#). Send him feedback or column ideas to mike@journaliststoolbox.com

A few years ago, I was teaching in a summer high school program when a journalism adviser told me he bans his students from "playing" on the Web during class time.

"They're always looking something up online and not doing their work," he grumbled.

My response: Have you ever taught them how to use an online database to find information about their school or community? Do they know where the city's online "city server" is? Do they know how to look up state and federal legislation online? How to search for a publicly-traded company's proxy statement? How to use an experts database?

His response: A blank stare.

The thing is, we have to **teach** them how to use the Web as a research tool and not a toy. As the 2001-2002 school year approaches, many of you are preparing your college and high school syllabi. So here's an idea: Incorporate Web research into your reporting and editing courses.

Over the summer, we've updated several Toolbox pages for student journalists and teachers: [Education](#), [College Journalism](#), [High School Journalism](#), [Writing](#), [Copy Editing](#), [Media Ethics](#) and [News Industry](#).

But they need to learn more about using the Web than just looking at a few journalism sites. You have to teach them about all the tools available to them for research. You can achieve this by coaching them through weekly research assignments.

This shouldn't be an overwhelming task that distracts from teaching other journalism fundamentals. It should complement those teachings. For instance, during the week you teach fact-checking, schedule on online fact-checking exercise along with other assignments. (I mention a few below).

Introduce the assignments one week at a time. Work through them as a group to start, then in small groups in-class, then as take-home assignments.

Though targeted for college students and professors, high school juniors and seniors can grasp these exercises as well. Both full-time professors and part-time professional adjunct instructors will find this lesson plan helpful.

At the end of next week's column, I'll show you how to pull all the lessons into one reporting techniques assignment.

Here's a 12-week program to teach your students online research techniques. The first six lessons are in this week's column, and we'll introduce six more steps next Monday.

WEEK 1: THE STRATEGY

True, Web research alone does not carry the story. There's still phone calls, faxes and what Melvin Mencher calls "shoe-leather journalism" -- going out to the scene to interview sources in-person.

Still, having working knowledge of the Net can help your students understand what they can and can't find online. This understanding will save them hours of research time in their careers ahead. It also can give them the necessary background information to help them ask better questions.

I usually start with a short lecture on what I just mentioned above: That the Web won't solve all reporting problems.

The assignment: I divide the class in half and circulate a fact-checking assignment. All the facts can be confirmed by using a print or [online almanac](#). I ask the class which side of the room will finish first: the side that gets to use the online almanac, or the group that uses the print almanac. The consensus is always the online almanac.

An hour later, they'll be surprised to see that looking up the facts in a print almanac is much faster than the online almanac.

Point proven: The Web isn't always the best way to go when doing research.

WEEK 2: WEB SEARCH BASICS

This week I introduce students to [search engines](#), [expert databases](#) and [phone, e-mail and map directories](#). Again, I give them a short list of assigned searches, something they can find in less than an hour. I'll have them look up gun control experts on the expert databases and justify why they would be good sources. I have them pinpoint a home, business or school address and plug it in to get the map, phone number, and criss-cross directories online.

With [search engines](#), I have the students search similar subjects on different search engines (maybe google.com, yahoo.com, excite.com,

etc.). This gives the students a basic understanding of how search tools work and provides a foundation for the weeks to come.

I also show them how to go to [domain registration sites](#) and look up the authenticity of a Web site. All they have to do is type in the URL and the tools will return the name and contact information of the person or company who owns the site.

Another good tool to familiarize them with are [expert databases](#). These are usually free sites for users that operate on fees charged to "experts" who offer their services to the database. You can search databases such as [ProfNet](#) to find experts on everything from gun control to sports psychology.

It's important to remind the students to scrutinize the bios of the so-called experts closely. Are they published on the topic? Have they presented information on the subject or conducted a study? Also, use the phone number as a way of contact instead of e-mail. You'll get a quicker response.

WEEK 3: WRITING WITH NUMBERS

Before the students start to explore statistical-based sites, such as the census or federal government databases, they must first learn how to [write with numbers](#). This page features several types of calculators and math tools. Instruct the students to figure statistics on different calculators and see how the answers vary, even when they're using the same data. This teaches a valuable lesson: Don't trust every online calculator.

One of the best education tools I've found for journalism math is [Robert Niles' Statistics Writers Should Know](#). His site explains the basics: mean vs. median, figuring percentage and percent change, etc. This is a great reference tool that a young journalist will use time and again.

Also, students need to learn [basic spreadsheet skills](#). Few, if any, of my newswriting students had those skills before my class. But today's

newsrooms expect interns and young reporters to have working knowledge of spreadsheets and how to download them off the Internet.

WEEK 4: EDUCATION DATABASES AND CENSUS SHORTCUTS

There are some great research tools for education reporters:

- [The National Public School Location Search](#) allows them a number of ways to search for schools nationwide.
- [The International Archive of Educational Data](#) allows them to search through a library of surveys and other data.
- [The National Center for Education's School District Databook](#) features financial data on every public school district.
- Show your students the [Illinois Taxpayer's network teacher salary database](#) linked off the Toolbox [Education](#) page. See if your state offers a similar database for public school salaries. It could be a great basis of a study for your high school's newspaper.

Once the students have worked with education statistics, it's time to familiarize them with the U.S. Census. While the Census site can be cumbersome and frustrating to search, there are a few shortcuts.

Go to your community's online city server site, which will have local census and demographic information. Also show them the [Census Factoid Central](#) page, where they can get the statistical lowdown on where they live with a few mouse clicks at State and County QuickFacts.

WEEK 5: PUBLIC RECORDS AND FORM 990s

Form 990s are tax statements that non-profit organizations (many of them are charitable foundations) are required by law to file every year. Journalists, as well as any citizen, can access these documents and track donations and expenditures. USA Today did this recently with

sports charities. Turn the students loose on the Toolbox's [Form 990s](#) page on the Toolbox.

It's important to teach the students that very few public records can be accessed online. But the Web is full of sites that can help you find the right office that has the records. There also are several pay sites that can dig up credit, DMV and other records. Send them to the [public records](#) page to find these sites.

The [public records](#) page also has a few links to Freedom of Information Act sites. These sites walk students through the process of writing a FOIA letter (some even offer templates to fill in) and offer tips on which government agencies to contact for the information.

Also, the [Vital Records Birth/Death Certificates](#) site is very helpful in an initial search for public records because it allows you to search by state.

WEEK 6: PUBLIC POLICY, TECHNOLOGY AND THE SCIENCES

The Web is a haven for special-interest groups, technology and science- and medical-based sites. I tell the students to use discretion when searching these sites, as some of the data may be inaccurate or outdated. Still, the Web can put you in touch with many organizations you may not have known about. I use the contact information on the sites to reach the organizations' owners to check the validity and timeliness of a study I find on their sites.

Many of these sites have news-gathering devices that allow you to quickly access stories and research released by various organizations. This is a huge timesaver and often leads you to information a day or two quicker than using traditional media or news-based Web sites.

For example, the [science](#) page features a link to EurekaAlert, a clearinghouse of press releases for science discoveries. The [environment](#) page also features [newswires](#) as well as a handy [database](#) for tracking politicians who receive campaign money for companies harming the environment.

[SIX MORE STEPS](#) for teaching Internet research, including legal and crime databases, Federal and State government, listservs and a practical assignment for students to show what they've learned.

Related Teaching Resources:

- [Teaching Tools](#)
 - [College Media](#)
 - [High School Journalism](#)
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