



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

EXPLORING ENGLISH WEB SITES

Several years ago I entered a new teaching environment: classrooms equipped with Internet access for all students and computer projection devices for instructors. Soon, I realized that my methods of teaching developmental and program-level English would have to adapt to my surroundings.

Today, I explore English web sites with my students and observe their reactions. Which sites do they find attractive and accessible? Are these sites also credible, current, interactive, free? These qualities have become my criteria for evaluation.

As my students explore English web sites, I hope that they develop the critical thinking skills needed to evaluate any web site. Katherine Holmes has developed a web site evaluation exercise (<http://www.lesley.edu/faculty/kholmes/libguides/eval.html>), where students can critically assess the "merit" of sites such as Clones 'R Us and Whoopee, It's the White House! Maricopa Community College (<http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/show/what/eval-act.html>) also provides useful criteria for evaluation.

Initially, I find that students are drawn to attractive sites offering interactive quizzes. Perhaps the best of these sites, Guide to Grammar and Writing (<http://webster.comnet.edu/HP/pages/darling/grammar/original.htm>), belongs to Professor Charles Darling of Capital Community Technical College. This site features over 150 computer-graded quizzes, PowerPoint presentations, usage and grammar explanations, and tips for structuring essays and paragraphs. Clearly, this site has been beneficial to my students, to me, and to trees! For example, instead of duplicating handouts for subject-verb agreement or run-on sentences, I can project a colorful quiz on the screen, allow students to debate the correct answers, and provide instant feedback to their questions. Since students are required to vote on the correct answer to each question, their strengths and weaknesses soon become apparent and allow me to focus instruction. In addition, these quizzes reinforce

my credibility: perhaps other authorities agree with my instruction!

Although few sites offer interactive quizzes and PowerPoint presentations, many provide ready access to information and handouts. Dr. Paul Brians, an English professor at Washington State University, offers Common Errors in English (<http://www.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/index.html>), a site allowing students to click on explanations of commonly confused words such as affect/effect or redundancies such as ATM machine. I ask students to use this site as a novel way to understand usage errors, although they could find the same information in their English handbooks. Another site, Purdue University's Online Writing Lab (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/>), provides over 130 handouts with answer keys and includes such topics as punctuation, grammar, usage, rhetorical patterns, and research. As long as instructors acknowledge this source, they may use the handouts. I have cut and pasted exercises to Word documents to provide additional practice for my students—with no loss of paper!

Although hundreds of sites offer useful handouts and writing tips, I'll highlight only seven of them and apologize for not including more. The Paradigm Online Writing Assistant (<http://www.powa.org/>) discusses informal, argumentative, and exploratory essays. In addition, it offers useful tips for prewriting, creating a thesis statement, and providing support. Students can explore Brigham Young University's Writing Center (<http://humanities.byu.edu/writingctr/Handouts/indexb.htm>) for information about the writing process, punctuation, grammar, and research tips. The University of Richmond (<http://www.richmond.edu/~writing/>) provides prewriting activities and information about punctuation, sentence structure, and documenting sources. (Teachers interested in the Writing Across the Curriculum [WAC] philosophy might also check this site.) Offered through the University of Illinois, the Writer's Workshop (<http://www.english.uiuc.edu/cws/wworkshop/index.htm>) includes a grammar handbook and writing techniques. In addition, the Virginia Beach Campus of Tidewater Community



College (<http://www.tc.cc.va.us.writcent/index.htm>) and George Mason University (<http://www.gmu.edu/departments/writingcenter/handouts.html>) offer handouts about grammar, punctuation, and the writing process.

Many of these sites also offer suggestions for writing research papers. Clearly, we want students to avoid Internet-lifted research papers and to steer clear of sites such as cheathouse.com, cyberessays.com, essay world.com, and others. We need to make them aware of the legitimate resources that they can access. One commercial site available through the Infonautics Corporation (<http://www.Researchpaper.com>) includes an extensive idea directory for writers. Columbia University Press has compiled a useful Guide to Online Style for both APA and MLA formats (<http://columbia.edu/cu/cup/cgos/basic.html>), just as Troy State University offers Citing the World Wide Web in Style (<http://www.tsufl.edu/library/5/citation.htm>). The Modern Language Association offers the only "official" online MLA site: (<http://www.mla.org/>).

Some sites simply provide a humorous look at language problems. We have all seen what spell check devices cannot detect, how homonym confusion and malapropisms have become rampant in our students' papers. As my students explore the Frank and Ernest comic strip site (www.frankandernest.com), they often chuckle at AnimalGrammar and discover malapropisms in Malaprop Man's archives: "Look! Up in the sky! It's absurd! It's inane! It's Malaprop Man! I'm going Hi-Trek! I bought this flaptop commuter and am joining the Inflammation Age! This has everything. . . Windex 98, Knee Mail, Smell Checker, and Food Processor! Now I smurf the Internet for evildoers floating around in ciderspace! And the only danger to me is getting carpool tunnel syndrome..." (Frank and Ernest, March 28, 1999).

Occasionally, we find humorous misplaced modifiers (church bulletin humor), malapropisms, and other bloopers in Superteach (<http://webnz.com/checkers/Bloop2.html>). In my more advanced classes, some students enjoy the weekly challenge of the Puzzler from National Public Radio: (<http://www.npr.org/programs/wesun/puzzle>).

Dictionary and thesaurus sites can be useful and occasionally entertaining. Merriam Webster offers these practical, user-friendly resources: <http://www.m-w.com/thesaurus.htm> and <http://www.m-w.dictionary.htm>. Lexico, a provider of language learning services, offers these commercial sites: <http://www.dictionary.com> and <http://www.thesaurus.com>. The dictionary site offers instant definitions, a Word-for-the-Day feature, a translation link, dated but revered resources such as Strunk's *Elements of Style*, and links to

some of my favorite English sites.

Numerous sites offer hundreds of English links, but exploring these lists can be time-consuming and frustrating. The following sources were my "links" to the "links":

- Hansen, Randall, S. Indispensable Writing Resources. (<http://www.stetson.edu/rhansen/writing.html>).
- Larson, Gary B. Garbl's Grammar Guides Online. 22 (<http://members.home.net.garbl/writing/>).
- Madin, Mike. Academic Info:English Studies and ESL/EFL. (<http://www.academicinfo.net/englang.html>). (an independent educational directory supported by donations)
- National Council of Teachers of English. RTE Links Index. (<http://www.ncte.org/rte/links/index.html>).
- Stentor Communications. Language Sites on the Internet. (<http://pw1.netcom.com/~rlederer/rllink.htm>).

Garbl's Grammar Guides Online, updated on January 22, 2000, provided the most direct links to active sites.

As my teaching style evolves with technology, I am trying to avoid some of the inevitable pitfalls. I have tried to use Internet resources in moderation and to value classroom interaction more than interaction with the computer screen. I have learned the necessity of backup plans in case of computer failure and the importance of checking site addresses the day before using them in class: addresses change frequently! In addition, my students have learned that their textbooks may be more helpful and accessible for some tasks than quality Internet sites. On the other hand, I acknowledge that instruction with quality Internet sources appeals to traditional students and provides abundant teaching resources. With these resources, instructors may focus instruction more effectively and provide students with additional tools to become more independent and effective writers.

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November 10, 2000, Vol. XXII, No. 27

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Innovation Abstracts (ISSN 0199-106X) is published weekly following the fall and spring terms of the academic calendar, except Thanksgiving week, by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, SZB 348, Austin, Texas 78712-1293, (512) 471-7545. Periodicals Postage Paid at Austin, Texas. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Innovation Abstracts*, The University of Texas at Austin, SZB 348, Austin, TX 78712-1293. Email: sroueche@mail.utexas.edu