

# Internet Research: Reading the SIGNs to Evaluate Websites

By *Cindy H. Perdue* for Blue Ridge PBS (WBRA, WMSY, WSBN)  
William Byrd High, Vinton, VA

**Grade Level:** 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> Grade

**Time Allotment:** One 45 minute class with additional class time for cross curricular extensions.

**Overview:** Students will learn the importance of evaluating websites before using them for research papers. A United Streaming video will be used to explain the basics of website evaluation. Students will practice evaluating a website using a simple four-step process.

**Subject Matter:** English, but adaptable for research projects in any subject.

## Learning Objectives:

- Students will learn how to evaluate websites effectively when researching on the Internet.
- Students will learn how to use the free FindItVirginia databases to locate reliable information.

## Standards:

This lesson addresses in part the Standards of Learning for Virginia in English and Biology found at <http://www.pen.k12.va.us>

English

- 6.5 The student will read and demonstrate comprehension of a variety of informational selections.  
g) Select informational sources appropriate for a given purpose.
- 7.7 The student will apply knowledge of appropriate reference materials.
- 8.6 The student will read, comprehend, and analyze a variety of informational sources.

## Media Components

Video:

- *Discovering Language Arts: Research (Grades 6-8)* “Internet Research” (5:42). This is available from United Streaming <http://www.unitedstreaming.com>

#### Web:

- FindItVirginia <http://www.lva.lib.va.us/whatwedo/ldnd/finditva.htm>  
These databases are available through most school libraries. Ask your librarian how to access the databases from your school. From home, students will need a public library card as a password to access these free databases.
- <http://zapatopi.net/treeoctopus/> The hoax site to save the Pacific Tree Octopus.

#### Materials

##### Teacher

- Video:  
*Discovering Language Arts: Research (Grades 6-8)* “Internet Research” (5:42).  
This is available from United Streaming <http://www.unitedstreaming.com>
- SIGNs website evaluation diagram for students and teacher instructions.  
(Downloads as a pdf file- see attachment)
- LCD projector to display the website for the Introductory Activity and the United Streaming video in the Learning Activity.

##### Student

- Copies of the SIGNs website evaluation diagram (or posted near computers)
- Access to computers

#### Preparation for Teachers:

- Download the United Steaming video.
- Print the SIGNs website diagrams and teacher information. (Either post the SIGNs near the computers or make copies for the students.)
- Ask the school librarian how to access FindItVirginia databases from your school.

#### Introductory Activity

1. **Tell** students: “Imagine that you are researching endangered species, and find this website on the Internet.” Show students the site to save the Pacific Tree Octopus, <http://zapatopi.net/treeoctopus/>.
2. **Ask** students: “What is the purpose of this website?” Initially, the students may say the purpose is to encourage people to save the endangered Tree Octopus.
3. Now **ask** the students: “What is the source of the information?” Answers may vary.
4. **Tell** the students: “The only information provided is the website address. The *.net* tells us that it is a network. If you go to the home page, you learn the name of the author, and that the site is ‘Your Source for Conspiracies & Other Diversions’.”
5. **Ask** students: “Does this information appear accurate?” Students may note that the site has pictures and links to reputable sites, such as The Wildlife Fund and the World Conservation Union.
6. **Ask**: “Do the pictures look real? Does the information agree with what you already know about octopuses? Do all of the links look real? Are GreenPeas and the People for

the Ethical Treatment of Pumpkins real organizations?” Students should recognize that this information appears to be made up.

7. Ask students to identify the goal of the site. **Ask:** “Is it really to save the Tree Octopus? Is it to sell you something?” (Items for sale and donation links do not work.) “Is it to provide information? What kind of information and for what purpose?” (Students may suggest that the site is designed to show that you can’t believe everything on the Internet, or they may think it is just for fun.)

8. **Ask** students, “Would this site meet your needs if you were researching endangered species?” (Obviously it would not. There are much better sites for researching this topic.)

### **Learning Activity**

1. To give a **Focus for Media Interaction**, say: “To help you understand how to begin your research, we are going to watch a short video about Benjamin Franklin. During the video, I would like you to think of two different aspects of Benjamin Franklin’s life that you could research.”

2. **Play** the video, *Discovering Language Arts: Research (Grades 6-8)* “Internet Research” for 2:28 minutes. (**Pause** the video immediately after the narrator states, “With his many contributions, Benjamin Franklin played an important role in the history of the United States.”)

3. Discuss the focus question about what different aspects of Franklin’s life would be good for research. Some aspects of Ben Franklin’s life that could be researched include his experiences as a publisher, his experiment with electricity, organizing the postal system, or his involvement in politics, such as The Declaration of Independence and The Constitution.

4. **Tell** students: “As I play the last few minutes of the video, I would like for you to be prepared to answer the questions asked by the video.”

5. **Play** the video to 3:05 minutes. **Pause** immediately after the narrator asks which of the three websites would provide the best information. Ask students to provide the answer. (Answer: The encyclopedia article.) (Note: This might be a good time to mention that while online encyclopedias are excellent resources, the popular “Wikipedia” is a collaborative project created by community submissions by volunteers. The authors and editors of the articles may be experts, but they may not.)

6. **Play** the video to 4:20. **Stop** it when the video asks which of the three websites would provide the best information. Ask students to provide the answer. (The Science History site.)

7. **Play** the video to the end of the segment to check the student’s answers.

## **Culminating Activity**

1. **Tell** students, “The video you just saw provided some basic strategies for evaluating websites, but the research you are doing in middle school is more advanced than what you did in elementary school. You need more advanced strategies for evaluating websites. Fortunately, it is not difficult. You only have to look for four signs.”
2. Pass out copies of the SIGNs poster for the students or have them posted near the computers. Discuss the meaning of the red, yellow and green lights using the SIGNs for the Instructor directions.
3. **Tell** students, “We are going to research one aspect of Benjamin Franklin’s life, but instead of using a general search engine, we are going to use a database of reliable sources.”
4. Direct students to log on to the FindItVirginia databases. Ask them to type in the keywords, Benjamin Franklin and electricity.
5. Ask students to locate one article and evaluate it using the SIGNs method.
6. Discuss the student’s responses. **Ask:** “Did anyone find a ‘red light’ to indicate that the source may not be a good one? If so, what was it?”
7. Ask students what the advantage is of using the database instead of a general search engine. The students should have found few or no red lights in their database research. This would probably not be the case if they had used a general search engine.

### **Cross curricular extensions:**

- Any subject: Students create “baseball cards” for the class on any topic – endangered species, American Presidents, events in history, etc. that include an image and a brief description. Students present their cards to their classmates and evaluate the site used to find the information using the SIGNs.

### **Community Connections:**

- Research the history and purpose of Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia. How is it a community encyclopedia? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this type of resource?

### **Adaptation for English Language Learners or Special Needs Students**

- Many of the database articles on FindItVirginia are available in many different languages.
- Use online encyclopedias instead of the FindItVirginia databases to simplify the research for the culminating activity.