

The Student's Guide to Successful Online Research

When you are asked to research a topic for an online class, the task can quickly become overwhelming. Here are some guidelines for successful online research results:

1. Use credible sources

For example, let's say your assignment is to present three side effects common to a particular drug, called Procainimide. A search for the drug's name will display results from people that are selling the drug; the company that produced the drug and boasts about its positive attributes; blogs from people that have taken the drug and have an opinion about it; and health information websites that feed from databases of information. You'll even see a Wikipedia entry for it, detailing its history, uses, and side effects.

If you search for Procainimide from within Google Books, you'll be presented with books that include articles about the drug. If you search for Procainimide from within Google Scholar, you'll be presented with white papers that include the drug.

In this case, you would get better results if you started by searching for Procainimide side effects. Amongst the results, you would see this URL:

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginfo/meds/a682398.html>

This website is produced by the U.S. National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health. This is a credible source for the assignment.

The URL can tell you a lot about a website. Consider these points:

- Notice the last three letters of this URL: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov>
The 3-letter extension at the end -- .gov -- is used exclusively U.S. Government entities
- URL's with the extension .edu are used exclusively by post-secondary educational institutions
- .org often means it's a non-profit, or not-for-profit organization. However, the use of .org is not restricted and there isn't a requirement that a .org website can't be a for-profit organization.
- .com was intended for commercial use

2. Consider the search engine's mission statement when choosing which one to use. Consider how the mission statement could affect their page ranks and choose the best one for your research topic.

Google's mission: *"to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful".*

Yahoo's missions: *"Yahoo! creates deeply personal digital experiences that keep more than half a billion people connected to what matters most to them, across devices and around the globe. That's how we deliver your world, your way. And Yahoo!'s unique combination of Science + Art + Scale connects advertisers to the consumers who build their businesses."*

3. Keep track of the websites you visit.

Copy the URLs into a Word file and make notes about what you found there. Bookmark or save them as Favorites, perhaps even creating folders to help organize them. This will make it a lot easier to compile a bibliography and properly prepare citations.

4. Respect copyright law.

If you need an image to illustrate your point or concept, try to draw or photograph one of your own. When this isn't possible, try to find one that is in the public domain or in the Creative Commons. Using imagery that you did not create or obtain through open sources should be your last resort. The general rule of thumb is to assume that any information you find is copyrighted and to seek permission before using it. This includes discussion group postings, graphics, documents, audio and video clips. Obtain permission from the author or artist and credit your source.

Here is a list of the types of websites to find credible information:

- Academic journals
- Government publications
- Government authorities
- Scientific and medical content, sanctioned by known authorities
- Non-government websites that are NOT influenced by advertising and obvious sponsorship
- Archived news
- Libraries
- Museums
- Textbook publishers

Here are a few resources to get you started:

[NIC's Writing Center](#)

[NIC's Molstead Library](#)

[Wikipedia](#)

Keep in mind that Wikipedia is written collaboratively by largely anonymous Internet volunteers who write without pay. Anyone with Internet access can write and make changes to Wikipedia articles. It's important to consider the sources of the articles you find on Wikipedia. This is taken from their own website:

"While the overall trend is toward improvement, it is important to use Wikipedia carefully if it is intended to be used as a research source, since individual articles will, by their nature, vary in quality and maturity. Guidelines and information pages are available to help users and researchers do this effectively, as is an article that summarizes third-party studies and assessments of the reliability of Wikipedia."

[Google Scholar](#)

Google Scholar helps you find relevant work across the world of scholarly research.

[Google Books](#)

Find millions of great books you can preview or read for free.

[Google Patents](#)

[Creative Commons](#)

[The Library of Congress](#)

[ip12](#) ip12 is a public service organization and a learning/teaching environment

[The Public Knowledge Project](#)