

# Searching for and using online information

We often marvel at the ability of children today to use technology for games and communication but it cannot be guaranteed that they know how to find and evaluate the suitability of the information they retrieve. These skills are inextricably linked to the comprehension strategies of skimming, scanning, determining importance and summarising. Fortunately, an array of ICT tools and applications are available to assist teachers develop and hone pupils' skills in these areas.

## Progression from paper to paperless

For definitions, we traditionally consulted a dictionary; more detailed information for projects required access to an encyclopedia and primary sources such as journals, newspapers and magazines. The teachers of yesteryear could tell which encyclopedia a pupil accessed through the language register alone. Our primary sources were often unearthed with the assistance of a skilled librarian. The Internet now provides access to a variety of online dictionaries, encyclopedias and primary sources.

## Dictionary on demand

An adult dictionary is not suitable for a child and time should be taken to match the most suitable dictionary to your class (a specific language and/or bilingual dictionary). There is a useful tool at [www.oxforddictionaries.com/words/choosing-a-children-s-dictionary](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/words/choosing-a-children-s-dictionary). Most online dictionaries can be added directly to your browser or website for quick and easy access. The main benefit they bring the pupils of today is the ability to hear pronunciations of words with embedded sound files. Dictionary apps can be installed on tablet devices — some free, some not.



Example from [dictionary.cambridge.org/](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/)

Foras na Gaeilge has developed a fantastic online Irish–English/Gaeilge–Béarla dictionary with sound files for the various canúintí – Connacht; Mumhan; Uladh. This dictionary is being completed on a phased basis and is due for completion by the end of 2014.



Example from [www.focloir.ie](http://www.focloir.ie)

## Safe place to start research

For many pupils today the first port of call for information relating to a teacher-assigned project may be *Google*. Without the skills to find and select appropriate information, this may be a futile exercise and a more developmental approach is recommended. The items returned on the first page of results may not have immediate relevance to the topic and, more importantly, they may not be suitable for a primary school pupil.

During their initial forays into research, pupils can be taught to look for information from a trusted source and to reference the source of their material – they will only have one source initially. In Ireland, all primary pupils and teachers have school and home access to *Britannica School* through the Scoilnet portal ([www.scoilnet.ie](http://www.scoilnet.ie)) – this is a fantastic starting point for research.



## What can an online encyclopedia provide?

There are age-appropriate resources containing factual information, related multimedia and interactivity at three levels.



Foundation (Ages 5–10); Intermediate (Ages 10–14); Advanced (Ages 14 and up)

All levels provide the option of text to speech for reluctant readers thus providing immediate added value over a book-bound encyclopedia. The additional multimedia elements facilitate differing learning styles. Double clicking any word prompts the inbuilt dictionary to display the meaning of the word. A wide range of engaging multimedia resources that complement lessons are available for teachers. Furthermore, parents can support learning at home knowing that children can pursue topics of interest in a safe learning environment.

The skills of searching for information using keywords can be taught within the safety of *Britannica School* before introducing pupils to more powerful search engines that draw data from a variety of sources. Rather than using fully open search engines, pupils can now expand their research skills using student-friendly ones.

## Search engines for students

Customised search engines exist for student use and they are a great place to start.

1. **Sweet Search** draws information from a variety of student-friendly sources (including *Britannica School*) but also shows pupils that they can access information from other sources. [www.sweetsearch.com](http://www.sweetsearch.com)
2. **Refseek** offers a web and document search facility. Any documents found open within the Refseek site. [www.refseek.com](http://www.refseek.com)
3. **DuckDuckGo** offers web searching with a very clear layout and does not track previous searches. [duckduckgo.com](http://duckduckgo.com)
4. **Instagrok** displays search results visually, as a mind map, with core information, images and videos all viewable at a glance. Once logged in, pupils can make notes and keep a journal of their entire project. The subscription-based classroom version allows the teacher to view all the research being undertaken by pupils associated with that subscription. [www.instagrok.com](http://www.instagrok.com)

"We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom. The world henceforth will be run by synthesizers, people able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely." **E.O. Wilson**

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