Appendix A: An intuitive guide to researching sources on the Internet

There's a wealth of information on the internet; some of it good, some of it bad. And whereas information underlies all our beliefs, statements and actions, finding the right information is absolutely critical to everything we do. So knowing <u>where to look</u>, <u>how to look</u>, and <u>what to look for</u> are indispensable skills for anyone -- especially students – seeking information on the internet. This handout offers some simple, intuitive guidelines to seeking out the right information on the internet.

GOOGLE: Most internet searches start in Google, so many in fact that Google has gained informal verb status, as in: *"I Googled him and this is what I found."* Yet like any search engine, Google is only as good as the keywords that go into it. There are two approaches to entering keywords: broad and specific. Let's say you were looking for news on striking workers in Canada, so you type *"strikes" in* Google. *With a* broad keyword like that, you will get hundreds of thousands of websites, many of them dealing with other forms of strikes, like lightning. The more words you add to your string -- and sometimes the *kind* of words you add -- the more you focus your search. For example: *"strikes +2008"* would eliminate many websites carrying outdated or historical information. Type in "strikes + 2008 + organized labour" and you'll eliminate virtually all American websites (Americans spell it "labor" – no "u").

RELEVANCY: Anyone who's ever taken a "quick peek" at their email and then passed the next two hours surfing the 'net on five different continents should understand that time and space don't really exist in cyberspace. The same holds true for the content you might find while browsing. A web page may carry what appears to be useful information, but is, in fact, several years old, rendering the information obsolete. (An examination of the page's date should tell you that.) Another page may be up-to-date, but the foreign origins of the information may render it useless. For example, if you were doing a project on academic achievement in public schools, you might be inclined to use data from an American study, given that American and Canadian teenagers have similar cultural influences and values. But public education is poorly funded in the US, so can you really use their data? <u>Never settle for information that is old or detached from your topic.</u>

HEIRARCHY OF SOURCES: Not all website are created equal, accurate or honest. But some websites are more likely to be *more* equal, accurate and honest than others. Consider the following sources, and their strengths and weaknesses:

✓ **Mainstream Media** (eg: newspapers, magazines, broadcasters): Employs professional journalists trained to seek and report a balance of perspectives. Competition from rival media outlets makes integrity of information critical for survival. Most mainstream media are also subject to strict libel, slander and defamation laws, making them less likely to report lies. Publicly-funded media (eg: CBC) may have greater editorial independence from corporate sponsors and advertisers, but could also be subject to political manipulation in countries where democracy is tightly controlled or non-existent.
     [URLs: Short & simple with media outlet's name or acronym, followed by .com, .ca, .uk, etc… -- EG: *www.bbc.com***]**

✓ **Universities:** Well-known, respected universities will often conduct high-quality, peer-reviewed research studies into medicine, public policy, laws, etc… within their various academic programs. Some studies are financed by corporate dollars, so make sure there's no conflict-of-interest in the results.

[URLs: Usually includes the school's name. Tagline will often include .edu --- EG: www.harvard.edu]

✓ **Governments**: Most western democracies operate professional civil service departments (eg: Health Canada) that produce fair and accurate information for the government and public.

[URLs: Longer URLs, often using multiple acronyms, underscores and slashes. Tagline will often include .gov]

☑ **NGOs & Associations:** Non-governmental organizations and associations exist for a set purpose, whether it's to cure cancer or advance environmental causes, etc… They often have access to the latest information or statistics in their sphere of interest. Keep in mind that they have their own agendas and cannot be counted on to provide a broad range of perspectives, especially any that go against theirs. Use with caution.

[URLs: Similar to media URLs, but may employ .org tagline]

☑ **Wikis & Indys (eg: Wikipedia):** Sites that rely on users to provide and edit content. Constant peer review allows information to evolve, usually towards more accuracy. But the contributors are not recognized authorities on their subjects, and being anonymous, are not regulated by law or professional integrity. These sites are also prone to disseminating rumours and misconceptions, sometimes weeks and months after being disproven by more credible sources. Use with caution.

[URLs: May have "wiki" in the URL. Most end with .com tagline]

✘ **Corporate:** Corporations publish information on their websites, most of it public-relations spin, with some republished material from sources listed above where it suits the corporate's interests. The decision to provide – or not provide – information, and the *content* and *tone* of that information, can always be traced to the company's profit-making agenda. Manipulation of information makes these websites unreliable.

[URLs: Same as media]

✘ **Homemade sites, blogs, etc:** Virtually untouched by law or public scrutiny, these websites can publish just about anything, making them rife with errors, outright lies and baseless rumours. There are, of course, a few responsible people out there publishing accurate information from their home computers, but separating the good from the bad is nearly impossible. If you want to use anything from a homemade site or blog, verify its information with a few respectable sources, such as mainstream media sites.

[URLs: Ridiculously long URLs, often impossible to memorize due to the erratic use of letters, numerals and symbols. Tagline will often end, eventually, in .com]

Appendix B: Writing an advocacy letter

Nothing gets the attention of politicians and CEOs like a letter from a concerned citizen. The advent of email makes writing, sharing and sending letters easy, while handwritten letters still offer a personal touch that is hard to ignore. However you compose your letter, here are some fundamental guidelines you should follow when making your case.

- **Identify the recipient**:
  If you want your letter to be read by a politician or CEO, and not an intern in the PR department, identify the recipient by name. Letters written "to whom it may concern" often go to those the least-concerned!

- **Focus:**
  Decide in advance what exactly you want to address and stick to it. Rambling letters are hard to read and suggest a lack of certainty in what you're asking, making the reader less-inclined to act on any particular request or suggestion. If you have multiple issues to raise, consider writing multiple letters.

- **Personal:**
  Explain your personal connection to the issue. This will help establish the human element behind the cause. You may even explain how the reader is personally connected to the issue as well, but be careful not to make presumptions that could turn out to be false, thus discrediting your concern.

- **Specifics:**
  Clearly state your concern, including any dates, names and details. You need to show the recipient you know what you're talking about and give him/her something to investigate, especially if your claims have never been raised before. Having established the details of your concern, you should also identify the recipient's role and power to effect change. (Keep in mind your recipient may not even know how he or she can act on your request, so it's good to make his or her options clear.) If you don't have any specifics supporting your concern, you should do a little research before you write.

- **Respectful:**
  Try to control your emotions when drafting your letter. If you feel very strongly about the issue, let it be known, but do so in a respectful manner; hostility towards your recipient will not encourage action. (Indeed, the letter may be crumpled up and thrown out in mid-sentence!) Allow yourself separate the individual from the issue; recognize that the recipient may not necessarily intend to cause harm, but may need encouragement or ideas on how to do the right thing.

- **Be brief & clear:**
  Do all the above and stick to one page, or about 500 words.

- **Identify yourself:**
  Make sure you include your full name, address, phone number and other contact details. (You know the recipient's name, why shouldn't he/she know yours?) By identifying yourself, you give the recipient an opportunity to contact you, and you also make it clear that you're a functioning member of society with the power to vote (perhaps) and money to spend on what's right. Don't forget to forward (or CC) the letter to others who share your concern -- it's good to show the recipient you have supports. (There's power in numbers!)

  -Produced with direction from Canadian Grandmothers for Africa

Appendix C: Consumer Activism

"STRATEGIC SPENDING" OR "HOW I BECAME A GLOBALLY-CONSCIOUS CONSUMER"

START UP: Think of four products or services you purchase in any given year. Mark them down.

PRODUCT or SERVICE	FAVOURITE *Brand, company, etc*	CONNECTION TO GLOBAL ISSUES (include web address of source – edu/gov/org only)	ALTERNATIVE
Fast or junk food *Burger joint, chocolate, candy...*			
Beverage *bottled spring water, coffee, soft drink...*			
Clothing, Shoes, Jewelry or retail store			
Toiletry *Shampoo, makeup, perfume or cologne*			

STEP 2: Do research on each item to see where your money is going. Consider the following issues:
- Environmental destruction
- Animal rights violations
- Human rights abuses
- Fair Trade
- Labour practices
- Unethical marketing strategies

Start with Google and go on a fishing expedition… you're looking for one of two things:
1. Reasons to <u>STOP BUYING</u> your favourite products and services
2. Reasons to <u>KEEP BUYING</u> your favourite products and services

Your reasons may be based on any of the six global issues listed above. You may identify a connection between the product/service, or the parent company/source. You may identify something negative, positive or perhaps both… Whatever you find, try to build on your research… look for <u>multiple</u> and <u>credible*</u> sources to confirm your findings (*.edu/.gov./.org)

Globally Conscientious Consumer Unit

Start your research like this:

Google: Starbucks + Fair Trade
Google: McDonald's + Animal Rights

 Once you've established a clear and reliable connection to a global issue, record it on your chart.

STEP 3: Where any product or service was connected to something unfavourable, search/brainstorm for an alternative with a better track record. Record your search results in the "Alternative" box on the chart.

STEP 4: Write a 500-word reflection on the "global" effect of your spending habits and what you can *(or what you are doing)* as a globally-conscious consumer to channel your money in more positive directions.

STEP 5: Write a 100-200 word email to a company (or CEO) explaining why you will boycott their product or store. Identify what corporate practices you want to see improved before you will reconsider. ***Email*** this letter and "CC" it to 10 friends and your teacher.

Chart: /5   Reflection: /10   Letter: /10   Organization: /5