

## Electronic Notes

Web-based exercises can help students avoid plagiarism and take notes more efficiently.

By Helene Krauthamer

---

### Introduction

Students often get caught up in the Internet tangle and forget about critical evaluation of their sources. Just as students photocopy articles without reading them, they also download and print out articles, omitting the critical step of annotation. Now that finding and copying articles is so easy, we should encourage students to take the time for more critical thinking about the information they locate. One of the challenges is to find ways that computers can enhance the research process, and electronic note-taking can fill that role.

Working in a computer lab that has access to the Web as well as to word processing software, I have used the following workshop with classes doing Web research for their English papers.

### Background: Online Research and Note-Taking

Online research is the most exciting advance since word-processing, but many still regard it with skepticism and suspicion. Some faculty doubt that it can be as valid as “real” library research and worry that it will promote laziness in students who may never leave their terminals in the proves of doing their papers. A major concern is the threat of plagiarism because it has become so easy. Still others lament the loss of the romance of the library, the late hours in the stacks, the thrill of accidentally finding a useful source in an unlikely place. Nevertheless, most of these concerns are offset by the advantages: the speed with which computer searches can find articles, the ease of copying and saving these sources, which were formerly hidden away.

Arnold and Jayne discuss the problems involved in teaching students to use the Internet for research, pointing out, however, that the Internet provides a good opportunity to educate students to evaluate their sources. Insofar as most library materials are professionally reviewed, critical evaluation of sources becomes an artificial issue in the traditional context. On the other hand, the anyone-can-publish-anything context of the internet gives students real-world experience in critical thinking as they decide which sources are reliable. As Arnold and Jayne point out, students can be taught strategies in library workshops to access and evaluate sources.

After finding and selecting sources, students need to learn to annotate them, a step that most tend to skip. Based on my experience in the writing center, almost no students bother to write note cards as suggested by most style manuals, unless required by their instructors. Students generally ignore the critical reading strategies of underlining main ideas, writing comments in the margins, or writing a summary of the article, assuming that they will retain the information when they need to refer to the source later in their

paper. Perhaps students need more explicit instruction, more motivation, and/or more enticing methods of note-taking.

Although some handbooks explain how to use computers effectively in teaching writing, one particular skill that has not been completely discussed is the use of electronic notes. Irvine (74-75) explains how easy it is to copy and paste information from the Web into Word-processed text files, a technique that many students need to learn. Unfortunately, he does not discuss the need to annotate what is being copied, an oversight that could inadvertently lead to plagiarism, although he does caution readers to use quotation marks (76). The issue of plagiarism is particularly important when students use electronic sources, as Klausman, points out, because it is so easy and because students often are unaware of the sources' authors (209). Klausman, therefore, takes the opportunity to explain the different forms of plagiarism and illustrates how to avoid them. As an added incentive, he demonstrates to students just how readily instructors can recognize plagiarism, as well as how easily these instances can be discovered via the Internet.

Rodrigues and Tuman also discuss plagiarism, though not in relation to the web. They demonstrate a system for completing "electronic note and bibliography cards" (40) by creating electronic templates that include the traditional elements of note cards: key words, author or title, notes, and personal responses. Unfortunately, they do not illustrate, as Irvine does, how simply one can move from online articles to these note cards, although they explain how to move from the note cards to documents (49) and avoid plagiarism. This method may also be awkward for students, particularly if they are resistant to note-taking and/or computers. Clearly, students need a more streamlined process that leaves them time for critical evaluation.

### **The Electronic Notes Workshop**

The method I use introduces a form of electronic note-taking that involves a more familiar approach, similar to highlighting and note-taking on printed materials. Students are often more comfortable with this system insofar as they have used it in their textbooks and photocopied articles. It also is an efficient and economic method of annotating online sources.

Assuming that the students come to the workshop with a research topic, the first step is to ask them to find a suitable article on the web. This entails discussion of two important skills: how to find articles and how to evaluate them. Most students are familiar with Yahoo! And other search engines, but when asked, "What's wrong with yahoo? They usually look surprised. This leads to a discussion about the difference between peer-reviewed materials, such as that found in libraries, and material posted on the Web by anybody-who-has-anything-to-say. (See Arnold and Jayne for specific strategies for teaching students to use the Web.) often, students are unaware of the need to evaluate their sources, and issue that is important in any research, but quite critical for Web research. They often do not see the difference between biased sites or sites that may be trying to sell products, and sites that may be true sources of information. Just when I have them worried about the credibility of their sources, I introduce them to the institution's online library and its databases, assuring them that what they find there is

likely to be safe. I inform them that even though not all databases will contain the most relevant information for their topics, they are just a few clicks away from those that will. Missteps will not be costly, as they might the old-fashioned way. Occasionally there is a need to discuss search strategies, but usually most students find at least one full-length article.

Once they have an article on their screens, they invariably want to print it. I then point out the signs in the lab that say “Not Printing from the Internet” and ask them why. Although our policy is based on avoiding waste, I explain that printing out the articles is not the best way to do research, saying that at the end of the process all they will have is a stack of paper. Instead, I suggest that after skimming the article to assure that it is useful and reliable, they copy and paste it into a word-processed document (see appendix). Too often students (and faculty) are unaware of how easy it is to use several computer applications simultaneously, and they are surprised that they can move between word-processed files and Web files so readily. The more savvy students are often accustomed to saving the Web documents as html files. However, I point out. Often html files are hard to pull up on other computers, particularly if the articles are part of a library database. Also, advantageously, as word-processed files, the articles can be annotated. Rather than put effort into photocopying or wasteful printing, the students can spend their time critically reading and commenting on the articles they find.

An important move is to ask the students to develop a personalized system of annotation. For example, to insert comments, students should select a particular font for their own words, perhaps using a different color or a larger font size than the original or simply make their comments in bold or italics. Students seem to enjoy exploring all the options under Format and Font, but an easy method is to merely put their own comments within brackets or astericks, using the same font that they would use in their papers, thus making later transfer easy. To highlight lines, students can use the highlighter button (of which they are often unaware), selecting various colors to code the information as they read: for example, yellow for main ideas, green for important statistics or details, blue for interesting points, and magenta for quotes. This activity entails some discussion of critical reading, points well worth reviewing. At the end of the article, students should always write a summary of the article, not referring back to the highlighted information, but writing exclusively in their own words. I point out that the effort they put into their annotations when they first read an article will more than pay off a week later after they have collected several more.

After annotation, the students should check their document to be sure that they have all the information necessary to include the source in their works cited page. A big problem with Web research is that often students are unaware of basic bibliographical details such as title, author, dates, and, now, the URL. While the Web document is still open, they should return to it to retrieve this information. They may have to move back to some of the earlier pages to find a title or an author. Again, most students are unaware of how easy it is to copy and paste the URL from the location or address box into the word-processed document. This becomes especially important if they need to return to the document at a later time themselves, by reversing the procedure and copying and pasting the URL from their notes into the location box of their Web browser. I remind the students that the access date is also a required part of the entry, and that they can easily

insert the date by clicking into Insert and selecting Date and Time. It is helpful to have a model MLA or APA online citation available for reference.

Finally, they should save each article as a separate word-processed file under the author's last name or the title of the article. Using key words along with the author's name may help them to sort and classify this information at a later date. But now, all their research can be stored on a single disk, rather than in bulky piles of articles. If there is room on the disk, or temporarily save the working paper on the hard drive, in order to move readily from their references to the draft, using the Window feature.

Having my own set of electronic notes, I use the last part of the workshop to demonstrate how to move from the notes to a working paper. I show the students my own disk of references that I have found on the Web and explain how I found them, discussing those sources I trust and those I may reconsider. Clicking into a reference, I illustrate how convenient it is to scroll down to my own comments at the end of a lengthy article, how the highlighted portions really do stand out, how the colors signal meaning, and how important it is to include all the bibliographical details at the top or bottom of the document. I also show them some of my mistakes, such as when I am missing some of this information from Web articles, and how I would go about retrieving it. I then show them how I can copy and paste material from the notes directly into a working draft.

Quoted material is now color-coded, so when it is integrated into the body of the paper, it becomes easy to see if too much of the author's words are being used. Comments inserted throughout the article and the personal notes at the end can become the body of the paper. Bibliographical information can be copied and pasted from the document directly into the works cited page. (For this reason, it is more convenient to use the appropriate documentation format from the start.)

## **Conclusion**

Although these techniques may seem obvious to experienced users, there is a need to teach them to most students, and occasionally other faculty. Everyone is both curious and suspicious about using the Internet to do research. Students think that their peers are more proficient than they are, and teachers suspect that their students are using the Internet in spurious ways. Showing students how to handle Web material in a workshop session allows for open discussion of these concerns. The workshop provides a good opportunity for students to learn how to find, evaluate, and save Web sources, how to read critically and annotate the sources, and how to weave them into working drafts and avoid plagiarism.

## **Appendix**

### **Electronic Notes Handout**

1. To copy the article, click Edit and then Select All. This will highlight the complete text. Click Edit again and then Copy. This will place the selected text onto the clipboard.
2. Next, open a Word document. Either click on the W on the Office Shortcut Bar in the top right corner of the screen, or click on the Start button in the bottom left corner of the screen, click

Programs, and then click into Microsoft Word. A blank Word document should appear on the screen.

3. Click Edit again, and the Paste. The selected text from the Internet article should now appear in your Word document. You may have to clean it up, as it will have lost some of its formatting, and there may be some material that you will want to delete.
4. Read your article to see if the URL (<http://www...>) is provided at the top or bottom. You will need the URL when you prepare your works cited page, as well as for future reference. If it is not in the article, return to the Internet source by clicking the Internet title on the navigation bar at the bottom of the screen. Clicking the title will restore it to the screen, and the Word document will zoom down to the navigation bar. Find the Location or Address space and highlight the URL. Just below the top of the screen. Click the mouse into the white space and highlight the URL. Click Edit and then Copy. Return to your Word document by clicking the Microsoft Word title at the bottom of the screen on the navigation bar. This will restore your Word document. Place the mouse at the top of the document. Click Edit and the Paste. The URL for the article should now appear at the top of the document. You should also insert your date of access, since this information is also required part of the entry in Works Cited. Click Insert and then Date and Time. Select the proper format (day month year) and Click OK.
5. To make notes on your article, devise a system of annotation. One suggestion is to insert your own comments as you read, using a larger font size for your words, a different color font, or simply putting your comments between brackets or asterisks. You may also highlight sections of the text in different colors by using the highlighting button. For example, you may try yellow for main ideas, green for important statistics or details, blue for interesting points, and magenta for quotes that you may want to cite in your paper. At the end of the article, you write a summary, so that you do not have to reread the entire article again.
6. Save each article as an easily retrievable file name, using a key word and/or the last name of the author. Be sure to save it to your disk (Drive A), not to the hard drive.

### **Works Cited**

Arnold Judith M. , and Elaine Anderson Jayne. "Dangling by a Slender Thread: The Lessons and Implications of Teaching the World Wide Web to Freshmen." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 24 (1998): 43-52. 9 Nov. 1999.

<http://mdusa.lib.umd.edu:8000/WebZ/Authorize:sessionid=0>.

Irvine, Martin. *Web Works*. New York: Norton, 1997.

Klausman, Jeffrey. "Teaching about Plagiarism in the Age of the Internet" *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 27 (1999): 209-12.

Rodrigues, Dawn, and Myron C. Tuman. *Writing Essentials*. New York: Norton, 1999.

Free access to journal articles mentioned in the Inbox is provided for 21 days from the date of Inbox publication. After this free-access period expires, articles are available to journal subscribers only.

MLA Citation for this article:

Krauthamer, Helene. "Electronic Notes. "Teaching English in the Two-Year College 28.3 (March 2001): 302-306.