Google Searching as a Pathway to Government Information Literacy

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For many students looking for government information, the default is to perform a simple search in Google. Our goal is to help students to perform better searches and to begin to think about government information critically. Here's the pathway--

1 The first step is to introduce students to Boolean operators, phrase searching, truncated searching, etc.

Next, we teach them about top-level domains (TLD) and how to perform top-level domain searches—focusing on the domains .gov and .mil. The search command is: site:.gov + the keywords or search terms. Note: there are a few government entities that use other top-level domains such as .edu, .org, or .us, for example.

2 Sometimes students will need government information that may not appear in the results of a TLD search. This may be because the web content isn't indexed or optimized in a way that makes it discoverable by general search engines. Regardless, we direct the students to government search engines such as govinfo.gov, usa.gov, congress.gov, and science.gov and discuss the uses of these search engines.

3 Finding government information efficiently and effectively isn't enough. The next step is to help students find credible government information. Information produced by the federal government is by its very nature authoritative. But students must determine if the information is trustworthy. We encourage them to distinguish between perspective/point of view and bias (which is unfairly prejudicial) by showing them web pages from the Environmental Protection Agency and the United States Department of Agriculture. We direct the students' attention to not only different content between the two government websites, but also the different points of view on the same topics.

4 On this path, we start in familiar territory for students: Google. Showing students an immediately useful search tactic on a familiar platform serves as a "hook" for engagement and building trust. We then use these Google skills to introduce deeper information literate mindsets as outlined by the Framework for Literacy in Higher Education. Step 2 on the path invites students to consider the best search platforms to fit their information needs, reinforcing the frame "Searching as Strategic Exploration." Step 3 asks students to consider whether authority = neutrality, understanding that "Authority is Constructed and Contextual." Our aim is for students to gain a nuanced understanding of government information and for them to develop concrete strategies for navigating these sources.

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