

Teaching Information Literacy in the Public Library, or Why a Public Librarian Would Take on the Role of a School Librarian

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The What-Do-You-Know Game

Have the children choose partners to work with. In order to play this game¹ you can use a daily newspaper, a children's magazine, a dictionary, an atlas, an almanac, and a volume of a children's encyclopedia. Pass a different resource out to each pair, and then ask them to find one person, place, or thing in their resource and write it down on an index card. When they hand the index cards to you, have one student roll a very large die. Depending on what number comes up, ask the whole group to name that number of facts about what was on the first card. Write down the facts on a flip chart. Do this for every index card.

Sometimes the kids will come up with, for instance, six facts about the United States. Often, though, they will be stymied to come up with even three or four facts about other topics, like Vietnam, atmosphere, Barack Obama, or Texas. Talk about what it means for something to qualify as a fact (as opposed to an opinion like "Texas is a nice place to visit"); this will lead you to the next activity.

Who Is This Guy?

Project a large picture of a famous person, place, or thing (I used Neil Armstrong) and ask the kids: who is the guy/woman/place/thing? In my example, most groups knew who Neil Armstrong was, but they were not always able to list more than 3 or 4 facts about him. Use a flip chart or whiteboard and list what the kids know and have them tell you what they would want to know. If they don't know who the person/place/thing is, ask them to look at the photo or image for clues and then use these clues to find out who/what/where the image is. Once you and your group have established who/what/where, then look in an online encyclopedia for an entry that discusses the topic. Have each pair of kids search in the online encyclopedia, project the entry on the

¹ This game is adapted from a comprehension game called "What Do You Know?" in **Wordplay** by Lori Goodman and Lora Myers (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 2004).

screen, and then read it out loud together. Look for answers to the group's questions. List the things you find in the encyclopedia entry that answer the questions and then, as a group, make a list of things the group still wants to know. In my example, the kids had lots of questions, such as:

- Is the flag that Neil Armstrong put on the moon still there?
- What does he like to eat and drink?
- Does he like ice cream?
- Does he like sports?
- Did he bring back rocks from the moon?
- How old was he when he went to the moon?
- Is he still alive?
- Is he a cousin to Lance Armstrong?

Then ask the kids what they would do to find out the answers to these questions (they will need to look in other sources for information!); point out that they will probably need to use more words to find what they want (this leads you to the next activity).

Nyms You Already Know and Love

Ask the kids if they had ever heard of a nym. You will probably receive mostly blank stares. Then project the words “synonym, antonym, and homonym” on the wall—and then almost all of the kids will say they have learned about them in school. Also talk about hypernyms (words that broaden a search) and hyponyms (words that narrow a search)². Talk about how the kids can use the concepts of synonyms they are learning in language arts class when they come to the library to search for information. To some of the kids, this connection between language arts class learning and keyboard searching will be a revelation—but we know this is the heart and soul of information searching.

² This activity was adapted from: Micro Module: How Lesser Known Nyms Help You Improve A Search (IMSA 21st CIF Online Learning Module); available at: <http://21cif.imsa.edu/tutorials/micro/mmpdf/usingnyms.pdf>

Then you can talk about using dictionaries, encyclopedias, and the thesaurus as places to look for nyms (for Computer Camp, I had convinced the public library to purchase licenses for the Visual Thesaurus for all of the laptops in the lab and all of the computers in the Children’s Department). My Computer Camp students were absolutely amazed by the Visual Thesaurus and your students will be, too. I’ve never seen any group of kids have so much fun with words. Watch your kids squeal with delight as they see the array for one word morph into an array for another word—and then give them a chance to play with the Visual Thesaurus. This is an enjoyable, fun, and intellectually stimulating way for kids to see the relationships between words and to begin to use a tool like a thesaurus to enhance their search queries...this will lead you to the next activity.

Mad Lib—The “Operator” Version

Your next step will be to move on to working with operators; you will probably find that most kids will have never heard the word “operator” used in conjunction with a computer search. Present the operators AND, OR, NOT, and Quotation Marks. Do a guided search using different combinations of words and operators; for this project I created something of a Mad Lib-type format on a flip chart for combining search terms and keywords. Take the words generated by your Who Is This Guy activity to generate your “Operator Lib.”

Here is an example: for my group that wondered whether Neil Armstrong was Lance Armstrong’s cousin, we constructed the following “OperatorLib,” starting with one of their questions; write all of this out on a flip chart or whiteboard, so the kids can really “see” the additive and subtractive process of forming an effective search string:

Is Neil Armstrong a cousin to Lance Armstrong?

(eliminate the articles, conjunctions, prepositions and the search string becomes):

Neil Armstrong cousin Lance Armstrong

(add the quotation marks, so the search string becomes):

“Neil Armstrong” cousin “Lance Armstrong”

(then use the Visual Thesaurus to look for synonyms; we put the word “cousin” into Visual Thesaurus and found the word “relative” so we substituted these words and the final search string became):

“Neil Armstrong” relative “Lance Armstrong”

Follow this process a number of times using all of the different operators and swapping out words you have found in the encyclopedia entry, articles about your topic, words the kids want to try, and using the Visual Thesaurus to come up with more synonyms. Ideally you'll have a laptop connected to the web and you'll be able to project a search on a large screen or whiteboard and the flip chart or whiteboard you're using for the “Operator Lib” will be in proximity to the projected web query. As you are playing “Operator Lib” go to the computer (and have the kids use their computers) to try out the queries. Point out what happens when you don't use the quotations marks (the number of hits will skyrocket). The kids will see that putting the words together differently or using different combinations of words and operators actually produces different search results. They will also see that they get better results when they got rid of the question format. But most importantly, they will experience how librarians actually play with words when searching, that we may have to try even the same words a number of different ways, and that there's no “right way” to find information; your kids will love the “Operator Lib” format and this will get you ready for the final activity of the day.

Search Engine Showdown

Give each pair of students one search engine to use (I used Kids Click, Yahoo, Yahoo!igans, Google, Ask, and Ask for Kids). Have the kids compare how many “hits” they get for an identical search (I used Neil Armstrong as our search term, I wrote the number of hits from each search engine on the flip chart), then talk about why the results are so divergent—everywhere from no hits at all to 12,000,000 hits. This is a perfect moment to talk about the reality that even when we don’t find an answer in one place, it’s worth trying the same search somewhere else.

Also, look at what happens in different search engines when you spell something incorrectly (Google helps you out by providing an alternative to your spelling). Then take one search from the general to the very specific, so everyone can see how the number of results will narrow in a Google search when you go from:

**dogs→hound dogs→basset hound dogs→purebred basset hound
dogs→purebred basset hound dogs Chicago**

Finally, go to Clusty.com and show your students how the search results are separated into different subjects, which makes it easier to get an idea for a narrower subject as well as to find specific information in a more general search. We did our “purebred basset hound dogs Chicago” search again, and the results narrowed from 14,300 on Google to 8,907 in Clusty.

Day One of Computer Camp is busy and fun-filled, but it is also lays a foundation for your students, so they are prepared to actually do the work of Day Two—searching for information online—with some tools and strategies with which they are familiar and which are FUN! After all, in Computer Camp, it’s all about learning how to play with words!