LONGMAN Resources for Instructors:

TEACHING ONLINE: INTERNET RESEARCH, CONVERSATION AND COMPOSITION

SECOND EDITION

Daniel Anderson • Bret Benjamin
Christopher Busiel • Bill Paredes-Holt

Longman Resources for Instructors

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Internet Research, Conversation and Composition

Second Edition

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Christopher Busiel and Bill Paredes-Holt

The University of Texas at Austin

LONGMAN

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Longman Resources For Instructors: Teaching Online: Internet Research, Conversation and Composition, Second Edition

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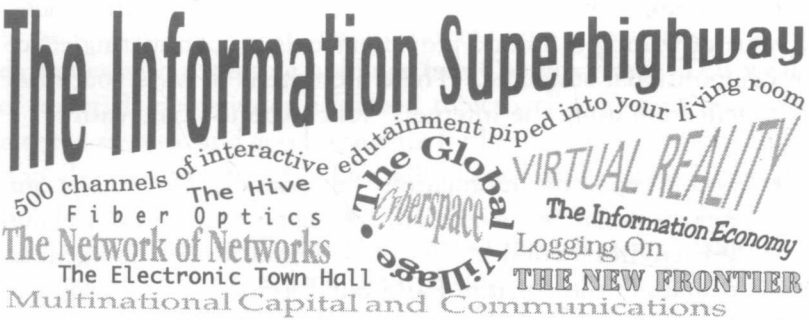
Chapter One: Introduction 1



The Internet

Recent years have seen the Internet receive unparalleled media coverage, touted as an unlimited resource and an egalitarian forum that connects users around the world. Of course if you've tried to get online, you're probably aware that the realities of the Internet don't necessarily match the hype. Resources can be difficult to locate, and the overwhelming amount of vapid, even offensive, information on

the Internet can make online experiences disorienting and disturbing. Those who idealistically view the net as egalitarian should also be aware of statistics suggesting that the vast majority of Internet users are white, American males affiliated with institutions of higher education.

Research, Conversation and Composition

While an Internet utopia remains unlikely, there is something about the net that is particularly attractive to teachers of writing. This enormous network does, after all, contain countless texts offering researchers new opportunities for scholarship. For users who are working at home or (perhaps more appropriately for this text) in a computer classroom, the net offers access to documents located around the world. Additionally, the Internet itself can be thought of as an enormous, constantly evolving conversation in which users meet to discuss almost any imaginable topic. This expanded audience gives rise to complex rhetorical situations which can illustrate the practical value of writing skills and provide models for considering effective compositional strategies. There are dozens of ways your class can benefit from using the Internet. Your students could easily:

- access important information. For example, United Nations reports might be used to provide support for an essay about the environmental effects of deforestation on indigenous peoples of the Amazon Basin rain forests.
- talk to authors of class texts or experts in various fields of study.
- meet online with composition classes from different universities to discuss a common text. For example, a project designed to evaluate the multiple perspectives in Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing* would be well served by a large pool of knowledgeable participants.
- design and "publish" an interactive, multimedia site on the World Wide Web. For example, students could build a site which examines the effects of economic sanctions on the

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dismemberment of South African apartheid, offering a research paper, links to further Internet resources about the topic, video clips of major figures, and forums for conversation among users.

Despite the potential advantages of Internet pedagogy and the significant rise in the number of computer-assisted rhetoric and composition classes, instructors have been surprisingly slow to integrate the tools of the net into their courses. Instructors who teach writing in computer classrooms without using the Internet may be ignoring a particularly valuable tool for improving student composition and critical thinking. Throughout this text we will elaborate on ways the net can bring about this improvement. Initially, we would like to suggest that the Internet facilitates the teaching of four major writing skills.

1. Research Skills: Because of the vast amounts and the wide variety of information that it provides, the Internet can be an excellent means of sharpening research skills. Using the Internet, instructors or students can perform keyword searches on a global scale, or access databases with extensive holdings (see Chapter Five). This wealth of materials necessitates a focused topic, well-evaluated and documented sources, and good strategies for locating information. Additionally, materials found online will in many cases differ a great deal from those found in a library. A student is likely to find resources comprised of new media (graphics, sound and video, for example), or to encounter texts that lack the traditional authority of "published" articles. These new media present students with the challenge and the opportunity to redefine their notion of what constitutes source material.

2. Considering Audience: The Internet offers many instructive opportunities for students to improve their writing by engaging with a larger audience. For example, by participating in a Usenet newsgroup—reading messages carefully, responding, posting questions, and composing longer, well-developed arguments—students can make their ideas public, receive informed feedback, and thereby expand

their conception of the requirements of writing for a particular audience (see Chapter Three). Participating in a conversation on the Internet requires students at the very least to compose for a diverse audience, highlighting for them the complexity of rhetorical situations and the importance of good rhetorical strategies.

3. Critical Reading: Because the net contains writing from a wide variety of sources, careful critical reading is necessary. For example, any particular listserv (see Chapter Two) might contain news messages from wire services, in-depth reports from independent journalists or academics who have done a great deal of research on a topic, and any combination of less authoritative messages. Because traditional requirements of expertise do not exist for "publishing," many previously marginalized voices find audiences on the Internet. While increasing the number of perspectives can to some degree democratize access to information, this diversity requires greater attention to source evaluation and provides a more complex understanding of an issue.

4. New Compositional Forms: The Internet can be a particularly useful tool for experimenting with new forms of student composition. The opportunity to construct hypertextual, multimedia projects on the World Wide Web—documents which can organize data, incorporate sound, graphics and video, link to source material located all over the Internet, and provide interactive spaces for audience participation and feedback—allows students to sharpen their rhetorical skills by concentrating on issues of audience, organization and style (see Chapter Six). Similarly, student projects in the text-based "virtual" environments of MU* spaces can help illustrate the importance of descriptive language as well as help teach students how to anticipate audience reaction to their work (see Chapter Four). In either case, asking students to write using new media is an especially effective way to highlight the fluid nature of rhetorical situations and help students envision writing as something more than just rules for five paragraph essays, topic sentences, transitions, and grammar.

Although making distinctions between these four writing skills is pedagogically valuable, the practice of teaching with the Internet works against a simplistic isolation of any of these elements. Conversing in a newsgroup, for example, engages a larger audience, hones critical reading skills, and provides resources. In this text, then, we will discuss the ways that e-mail, Usenet newsgroups, MU* spaces, IRCs, Gopher, and the World Wide Web can be used individually or collectively to strengthen, focus, and complexify a number of student writing skills. We hope that this text will provide the pedagogical insight necessary to incorporate the Internet into existing teaching goals and enough practical knowledge to implement those pedagogical strategies successfully in assignments and exercises.

Some Things To Keep In Mind

As we began to suggest at the opening, there is good cause to critique certain characteristics of the Internet. One of the ways we will consistently try to present critique is through our suggestions that you use the Internet only to the extent that seems merited for your courses. Above all, remember that you don't have to utilize every medium discussed in this book, and that you shouldn't be persuaded to use any of them just because they appear exciting. Similarly, these media can both compound existing instructional problems and introduce new dilemmas. You should be aware of these problems so that you can weigh them against the potential benefits of teaching online, always trying to determine whether the extra work merits the use of Internet media. Some of the problems that we discuss in the following chapters include:

- the initial tendency of students to play online (whether by getting off-task in real-time discussion environments or by surfing the Web for Beavis and Butthead or pornographic materials while they are supposed to be working on research projects).
- the temptation to lose focus on textual composition skills in favor of the excitement of "new forms."

- the vast volume of information on the Internet and the possibility for students to get lost.
- the steep learning curve of some applications and Internet technologies.

In tandem with these pedagogical critiques of Internet media, we would also like to present a broader critique of institutional privilege. Within the subset of institutions that have computers available for instruction, a range of different generations of equipment will be in use, and a variety of different setups will be in place for Internet access. We wrote this book primarily for an audience of instructors at institutions like ours, which provide workstation client software for Internet activities (programs on individual computers which provide a user-friendly interface for dealing with the Internet). We realize that not all institutions provide such resources, however, and want to be sensitive to these important differences. At many points throughout the book, we suggest some of the considerations you will have to keep in mind if your institution does not support workstation client software. At the same time, however, we want to recommend strongly that you use client applications. They will make teaching with the Internet a much more manageable task. (See Appendix Five for further information on client software.)

The primary pedagogical concern which grows out of this issue of institutional privilege is that you should try to develop and maintain relationships with the system administrators at your institution. You will receive the best information about available resources from them.

Perhaps more importantly, the question of institutional privilege reflects broader socioeconomic issues about access to the Internet throughout the world. We feel that remaining constantly aware of certain discrepancies, and discussing them with your students, is an important part of using these technologies effectively. Although Internet hosts are spread all over the globe, access to the Internet (and indeed to personal computers in general) is still heavily marked by class, race, gender, and geography.

Students should be especially aware of this problem when working on certain research issues, and carefully consider the sources they uncover. For example, there are only a handful of countries with Internet connections in the entire African continent. This discrepancy should complicate our understanding of a newsgroup discussion concerning a particular African nation—who are the people participating in the discussion? What do they have at stake? Which voices are not being heard?

Even if you or your students are not working directly on international topics (or concerns of privilege within the United States), being aware of larger, ongoing issues of access to computer technology is crucial in developing a perspective on work done in the classroom. This critique is one which we would primarily like to point out here in our introduction, since our focus on pedagogical concerns does not allow us to sustain a fully developed materialist critique of Internet access throughout the book.

Strategies for Teaching with the Internet

- Evaluate the time commitments required to implement the technologies effectively.
- Account for different levels of student technological expertise by designing assignments which provide options flexible enough to engage both more experienced students as well as Internet novices. Also, consider forming collaborative groups which can help alleviate discrepancies in student knowledge.
- Try to chart out the territory you plan to introduce to your students before you get to class. Don't assume that the technology will work the way you expect it to. Make sure to check and double check all instructions by walking through the steps before you give your students the assignment.

- Always try to have a backup plan that does not involve using computers in case there are problems with the technology.
- Integrate Internet activities into a well-thought out pedagogy. Don't just use the Internet because it's exciting and different.

What's Ahead

Each of the following chapters contains four major sections: **What**, **Why**, **How**, and a **Case Study**. The "What" section provides a brief description of a particular Internet medium, orienting the reader to the key terms and issues which are discussed in the chapter. This section is followed by the "Why" section, which focuses on the broader pedagogical issues of bringing the application into the classroom. The "How" section looks at the challenges of successfully integrating the application into a course and offers tips about how best to create assignments and structure classroom activities. Each "How" section suggests techniques and exercises you can use to introduce your students to each of the Internet media, and concludes with several more complex writing assignments utilizing the Internet. Finally, the "Case Study" offers an in-depth look at an actual assignment in which students use the medium to further their rhetorical and compositional skills.

Chapter Two discusses working with e-mail. We consider e-mail to be the building block of Internet communication, a tool that can transform the daily operations of the classroom. Our third chapter looks at Usenet newsgroups, focusing on the benefits of an expanded audience for student writing and emphasizing the importance of critical reading skills. Chapter Four discusses IRC lines and MU* spaces, text-based media which allow "real-time" conversation and the construction of virtual environments. Chapter Five looks at "browsing" the Internet for resources. We will consider a variety of strategies for

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