



Home	
All About CIC	CIC Magazine
Cable Companies & Networks	Professional Development
Programming & Resources	Family Zone

## CIC Magazine

- Current Issue
- Feature Articles**
- Lessons Online
- Web Site of the Month
- Contests
- In Our Next Issue
- About the Magazine
- Advertising
- Contact the Magazine
- Subscribe

### Feature Articles

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#### E-valuating the Web

Six questions to help you decide which Cable in the Classroom sites are suited to your needs.  
*Kathy Schrock*

Educators generally use one set of criteria when evaluating information on the Internet for students to use in their research and projects, and a somewhat different set when choosing sites for their own use.

As a technology coordinator on Cape Cod, Mass., and as the creator of [Kathy Schrock's Guide for Educators](#), I am always interested in helping educators evaluate and use the best resources to support teaching and learning. I want to help educators to integrate technology effectively (and easily) into their classroom. In my publication, [The ABC's of Web Site Evaluation](#), I list questions both educators and students can ask themselves when they are critically evaluating Web-based information. The questions include:

- Who wrote the pages and is the author an expert?
- What does the author say is the purpose of the site?
- When was the site created and last updated?
- Where does the information come from?
- Why is the information useful for my purpose?

These questions are based, in part, on the fact that the background of the author and the source of the information are often unknown.

How would these evaluation criteria change if it were known that the author of the information was a classroom teacher, college professor, or a well-respected expert in their field? What if the user could trust that the links offered on these sites had already been evaluated? Imagine being able to accept that the information presented was created by a subject specialist and educator. All you would need to think about was how to use it in your classroom or library media center. These are some of the advantages offered by Cable in the Classroom online educational resources.

Evaluating Cable in the Classroom sites created with the educator in mind requires yet another set of criteria. Because Internet users should never turn off their critical eye, some of the same criteria that apply to any Web site also apply to Cable in the Classroom sites. But others that address instructional design and appropriateness to the curriculum are also relevant. Here are some suggestions for evaluating Cable in the Classroom sites for teacher and student use.

### Questions for Evaluating Resources for Educator Use

#### Is the site easy to navigate?

A site may include a wealth of information, but if it is not easily accessible, the busy educator may not be able to find the needed information. Many of the Cable in the Classroom sites have exemplary navigation structures. Many have a search tool to the site's content, a help page, and/or a site map to assist both the educator and student when searching for information to support teaching and learning.

Here's just one example.

[The History Channel Classroom](#) includes an easy-to-navigate interface, a search tool to its own content, and a great page that explains to educators how best to use the site and the materials in the classroom.

### **Does the material presented follow accepted curricular and instructional design tenets?**

The objectives and content presented in the online lesson plans should provide correlation to national and state content, and include performance standards appropriate for the targeted age group. Even if the standards addressed are not the same as the ones you must adhere to, they are a good indication that the author of the material has an understanding of what educators need. Quite often, similarities between national, state, and local standards make it relatively easy to adapt a lesson plan that is correlated to a different set than the one you use. The objectives should be clearly stated and relevant to the teacher and learner. Ideas and tips for using the lesson plans with various grade levels should also be present.

Here's one of many possible examples of a site whose lesson plans meet these requirements.

[The DiscoverySchool.com Lesson Plan Library](#) supplies hundreds of exemplary lesson plans that follow a similar design template. Each lesson includes a list of materials needed, procedures, adaptations for use of the lesson with other grade levels, discussion questions, extension activities, evaluation and assessment tools, suggested readings, related online links, background information taken from the World Book online, and the academic content standards.

### **Is there a discussion board on the site that allows teachers to interact?**

The Internet has allowed educators to become colleagues with other educators outside of their school, state, and even country. A useful section of any educational Web site is an area that enables teachers to solicit input from their colleagues on successful classroom practices using the support materials and/or programming. Even if you don't post anything, reading archives of previous posts can provide you with ideas, let you know what are the most common questions about the resources offered, and give you a sense of what others think about the resources.> Many of these newsgroups, bulletin boards, and listservs require educators to register before using them. The information collected on many of the Cable in the Classroom sites is minimal and is used only for statistics for development of additional materials.

Here are some Cable in the Classroom sites that foster communication among educators:

The DiscoverySchool site offers listservs and "ask an expert" sites in their [Conversations area](#).

[A&E's Creative Ideas from Our Teachers](#), although not a live discussion board, includes posted ideas from teachers.

The History Channel has over 50,000 people registered for posting to their [online discussion groups](#) which are arranged by broad topics.

Teachers.nick.com offers a [bulletin board](#) for educators which includes tips, requests for information, and other kinds of exchanges among teachers.

### **Does the site allow feedback from educators?**

Educators know the type of information that's useful to support teaching and learning. With the huge amount of content that the Cable in the Classroom networks own, there are times when an educator would like to suggest these sites present information in a new way to support the curriculum. Look for an e-mail contact address on each site to allow the creative educator a venue for suggesting a new link, a new idea, or a new lesson plan, or voicing an opinion.

### **Questions for Evaluating Resources for Student Use**

**Does the site contain any additional resources that are not directly related to programming and may be used in support of teaching and learning?**

To entice educators to re-visit their sites on a regular basis, many of the Cable in the Classroom educational sites include additional teacher tools and resources. Here are some of the most useful.

[The History Channel's This Day in History](#) includes a searchable and categorized database of historical events of significance for every day of the year. One use of this site would be to have students conduct in-depth research on an event that occurred on their birth date.

[The Weather Channel's Weather Glossary](#) provides easy-to-understand definitions of over 800 weather-related terms. Since weather is a topic of interest to all grade levels, this site is a good starting point for discussions of weather events.

[CNN's CNNfyi.com](#) provides up-to-the-minute news stories to help educators and students stay on top of world events. There are also stories and materials dealing with issues of concern to students.

[A&E's Biography.com](#) site provides biographical information on worldwide figures. This is a good research starting point to supply students with an overview of a famous person before they begin conducting in-depth research.

[Food Network's Terms, Tips, and Ingredients](#) provides an encyclopedia of over 4,000 food-related terms. This page would be useful for both consumer and family science classes as well as part of a foreign-language unit dealing with foods of the world.

The Discovery Channel offers a well-rounded [teacher section](#) in their DiscoverySchool area. A list of over 1,600 links for educators; free clip art for educator and student use; a set of teacher tools for making word searches, online quizzes, and worksheets; and online file storage are only part of this comprehensive site for educators.

### **Is there advertising on the page?**

This is a question of great concern to some educators when they plan to use a site with students. Many school districts try to limit the amount of advertising that is seen by students. However, providing information on the Web is an expensive proposition. A popular Cable in the Classroom network site might receive millions of hits each day. The computers, servers, Webmasters, and infrastructure to support a heavily used Web site each require resources to maintain it. In addition, many Cable in the Classroom sites compensate educators for creating lesson plans. In order to continue to provide information and resources at no cost, advertising is necessary to fund these content-rich sites. If you are concerned about advertising, but still want to use a site, especially with the early grades, ask yourself whether the ads are appropriate for young children, consider whether your students understand what an ad is, and make sure they know the difference between an ad and content information.

Each Cable in the Classroom site has content that is useful to classroom teachers, students, and parents. Their primary focus is support of the programming they offer, but each Web site also includes much more information. Educators should take the time to investigate the teacher-created lesson plans and support materials as well as the other original content provided by experts in the field. There is a wealth of quality information and content available to use to support the teaching and learning process!

### **For More Information**

To learn more about information literacy and Web site evaluation, visit the following sites.

**American Library Association.** [Information Power: Nine Information Literacy Strands for Student Learning](#)

**International Society for Technology in Education.** [NETS for Teachers](#)

**Patterson, Tracey, et al.** [Evaluating Educational Web Sites](#)

Schrock, Kathleen. [The ABC's of Web Site Evaluation](#)

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