

# ***“Too Much Information!”***

## ***Tips to Help Your Students Make the Most— and Best—of today’s Media***

**H**aving worked as a librarian for many years in both the public library system and in private and public corporations, I have come to develop simple prompts for young people who are just beginning to encounter and use all of the great—and sometimes not so great—information available to them. Below are some simple steps and questions students may use both in the accessing of information as well as in its evaluation.

### **ACCESS**

◇ Obviously, Web sites provide access to newspaper and magazine content. Identifying desired sites will be easy for most students. What they’ll need to know more specifically is site organization: Are there archives available? Are they free? How far back do they go? How much of today’s news is available to download? How much is available to download full text?

◇ Students need familiarity with online services—LexisNexis, for instance—which provide more extensive archives and cover thousands of sources. Understanding the concept of groupings of libraries can focus the search better. Beyond LexisNexis, there are services that specialize in particular academic areas.

◇ The “old reliables,” printed indexes, are still widely used. *Ulrich’s Periodicals Directory* [<http://www.ulrichsweb.com/ulrichsweb>] and *Full Text Source Online* identify online sources for the unknowing searcher. Some sources will only be found in *Readers’ Guide* [[www.hwwilson.com/Databases/Readersg.htm](http://www.hwwilson.com/Databases/Readersg.htm)]

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◇Students should be familiar with a few comprehensive archives, like the New York Public Library newspaper collection, and know how to use them. This is especially useful for ethnic publications and out-of-print publications.

◇Some collections are maintained by organizations such as historical societies that are often not open to the public, so special arrangements need to be made for access.

◇Access to television news is now easier with services like ShadowTV, in which segments of broadcasts can be viewed on a split screen with accompanying script. (This can also be e-mailed.) The LexisNexis News Library also has a file called “script” that transcribes many major news organization broadcasts.

## EVALUATION

◇Look at several papers and compare their coverage of the same stories. Readers should know that page layout follows a formula, and that content and number of pages is always at least partly driven by advertising. A paper like the *New York Times* has a standard format. The extreme right column on the front page is considered by the editors to be the “most important” story, and the article on the extreme left is the “second most important.” A tabloid usually showcases one cover story to grab attention. But what is the paper trying to tell? Who is the audience? Are nonstandard words like *sez* and *prez* used? What is the print size? How are photos and graphics used to tell the story?

◇Watch a television news broadcast with the sound off for a few minutes. How do networks use facial gestures, body language, and the personalities themselves to grab viewer attention?

◇Invite speakers from local papers to your school so they can give their versions of what their mission is, and how they evaluate their own and competitors’ work. (Many publications also provide in-house tours.) In learning to evaluate, it’s useful for students to have people who put the paper together to explain their

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jobs and what they are trying to achieve. Students can then think through the evidence to see if stated goals are achieved, policies followed, and so forth.

◇Familiarize students with sources within self-directed media like the *Columbia Journalism Review* and *Editor and Publisher*. What do media people say the crucial issues in their field are, and how are they responding to these challenges?

◇Consider the impact that “watchdog groups” have. Conservative organizations write about the “liberal media.” CAMERA reports on bias in Middle East coverage. What do these groups say to readers and the publications they criticize? Who sponsors them and what agendas do they have?

Students become critical thinkers when they apply evaluative tools to sources. Teachers and librarians serve as the bridge between the two, showing students first how to get where they need to go, and then how to make sense of what they find.

#### **About The Writer**

Peter Edelman *has worked as a special and public librarian since the early 1980s, with companies including CBS, Rockefeller Foundation, the New York Public Library, and the Daily News. He has research credits or acknowledgments in sixteen books on diverse topics, from art and religion to sports and politics. As a resident of Hastings-on-Hudson, Edelman has served on the town's Library Friends board for five years.*

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