

Video Transcript:

How to Find Better Information Online: Click Restraint by Stanford History Education Group

Most students think the top result of a web search is the most trustworthy.

They often click on the first search result and hardly ever go beyond the first page. This is a problem because search results can be manipulated by the use of clever search terms and metadata. Companies engage in search engine optimization to push some entries to the top and move others to the bottom. Ads can appear at the top of search results, forcing other results down, too. Sometimes, this can place less trustworthy information sources above more reliable ones.

Our research with professional fact-checkers shows that they have a different approach to evaluating search results than students. Instead of immediately clicking on the first or second result, fact-checkers practice click restraint.

Before clicking on any result, they first examine the titles, the URLs, and the snippets, the brief information under each result, for clues. They look for trusted sources. By engaging in click restraint, they first get a sense of the information neighbourhood in which they've landed before clicking on any result.

Students, by hastily clicking on the first search result, can end up on a problematic site that leads them to even more problematic sites. The result, shaky conclusions based on dubious information. Before clicking on anything, fact-checkers scan the list of results. Are certain groups trying to influence the conversations? Might it be helpful to go to the second page of results?

Students need to understand that search engines aren't truth detectors. The information they present needs to be deciphered.

Click restraint allows students to get a general sense of the information about a particular topic before they dive in, head first. With practice, click restraint becomes a habit, a way of practicing just a bit of caution before taking a wrong turn.

Spending just 15 to 30 seconds examining search results can make a big difference in students' ability to avoid misleading sources online and find trustworthy ones.