

## **Tips, Ideas, and Suggestions for Creating a Classroom Website**

The following suggestions come from my personal experience creating and maintaining a classroom web site, Cynthia Olivier (1999), and my correspondence with fellow teachers and webmasters Eric Simpson, Louis Cornelio, and Malcolm Gray. This is by no means a complete list of do's and don'ts, but I hope they are found to be helpful.

1. **Have an idea of what you want before you begin.** Before beginning the actual process of building your web site with the software, make some notes, or draft what you want. Having a direction in which to go will save you hours in the long run.
2. **Check with your principal and/or district regarding possible guidelines.** Before you get too far, make sure you discuss your plans with your principal, and if need be, a district representative. Many districts have restrictions or an Acceptable Use Policy regarding what can and cannot be placed on a teacher's web site. In many districts, the principal is responsible for all material on teachers' web sites.
3. **Include student work.** Maintaining a classroom web site is not only a great way to communicate to parents what is happening in the classroom, it is also a marvelous opportunity to showcase students' writing and artwork. Who better to tell parents what is being learned in class than their children? Teach the students to write the updates. That way, parents get information from the classroom in the words of the students,

and the students improve their writing at the same time. In terms of art, a classroom web site allows you as the teacher to display the artwork of your students for millions to see. Out-of-state relatives can now have the opportunity to view the students' artwork, without having to attend an Open House.

4. **Obtain parent permission to publish students' work on the Internet.** As the work that is published on your classroom web site will be seen by the world, make sure you have parents sign some sort of release form giving you the right to use the students' writing and artwork on the web site. For security reasons, I personally do not include pictures of students, and I identify students' work using only first names (and sometimes last initials when students share the same first name).
5. **Proofread your site.** There is nothing worse than sending home to parents a newsletter containing errors. Since the material you publish on your classroom web site goes out not only to parents, but the entire world, you need to be even more careful about catching mistakes. Running a spell-check is typically not enough, for this doesn't catch grammatical errors or the improper use of correctly spelled words (e.g. homophones).
6. **Consistently update your site.** While surfing the World Wide Web in search of other teachers' classroom web sites, I came across several sites that hadn't been updated in months, and in some cases, years. One of the main goals of a classroom web site is to communicate to parents and the

community what is taking place in your classroom. If the site is not kept current, what is the point? Teachers' time is limited. Updates need not take place on a daily basis, but I would recommend that the content of the site be updated at least once a month. If you decide to post on your site the lists of spelling words, it is imperative that the lists be current, or else, as already stated, what is the point of posting the lists?

7. **Make your pages readable.** Use colors that are pleasing to the eye. Nothing effects reading more than distractions in color. Using background and text colors that are too similar decreases the readability of the page. A standard page in a book is black text on a white page for a reason. The key is contrast. This is not to say that bright, vibrant colors should not be used. A web page should be attractive and capture a viewer's attention, but not at the expense of making it difficult to read.
8. **Don't use too many graphic images.** Pages that contain dozens and dozens of images look great once they are downloaded, but they can take great amounts of time to download. Nothing is more frustrating than having to wait, and wait, and wait for a page to download. High-speed Internet connections have made this point less of an issue, but it is important to remember that many of your visitors will still be using a dial-up connection. Am I saying that your classroom site should not include images? Of course not. The key is to find a balance between pictures and text. The exception to this rule, of course, is an art page. I

use several art pages to display the works of famous artists as well as drawings and paintings of my students, and these pages would be bland without images.

9. **Make your site easy to navigate.** The best sites I have found are the ones where information is easy to find. The ability to move from page to page from any point in the web site is an asset in web site design. Always provide a link back to your home page. Users don't want to have to backtrack four or five pages just to get back to where they started. The use of frames is a good way to provide simple navigation about your site. A component of making information easily accessible is remembering to keep your web pages relatively short. It can be frustrating for a user who has to scroll down for what seems like an eternity to find something at the bottom of the page.
10. **If you include links, check them frequently.** Web sites come and go and often change URLs. Don't provide a link to a web site that no longer exists. Additionally, if you choose to place on your site hyperlinks to other sites, be sure you are familiar with the sites to which you are linking. Make sure there are no links on these sites to questionable or inappropriate material. It is possible to start at site *A*, link to *B*, then *C*, and end up at an inappropriate site, *D*.
11. **Make your site interactive.** Including elements like surveys, *Questions of the Month*, and games are great ways to allow users to interact with your

web site. Providing an opportunity for users to send you an e-mail is a great way to (a) open the lines of communication between you and parents, (b) let students drop you a note, and (c) elicit feedback. After all, it is their web site!

**12. Be prompt in replying to e-mail.** Building upon the previous suggestion, if you provide users the opportunity to communicate with you via e-mail, it is imperative that you respond in a timely manner.

**13. Include an *About the Teacher* page.** Including a page with general information (i.e. likes, dislikes) about yourself gives your students and their parents a chance to get to know you better.

**14. Periodically search the Web for examples of other quality classroom web sites.** Don't let your site grow stagnant. Build upon it. Improve it. There are fantastic web sites out there. Find them. Using a search engine like *Google*, type in a search string like "classroom web sites" or "5<sup>th</sup> grade web sites." Once you've found some great sites and gotten some good ideas, borrow some of those basic ideas. Now, I'm not saying to blatantly steal the fruits of other teachers' hard work. If you find something on another teacher's site that you'd like to incorporate into your own, it's a good idea to send the teacher an e-mail asking for permission to borrow his or her idea. I have found teachers more than willing to share their ideas with me. It's just a matter of giving credit where credit is due.

**15. Publicize your site.** Once you've gotten your site up and running, you need to let people know how to find it. One way to let your students and parents know how to get to your site is to make a simple handout providing detailed instructions on how to access your classroom web site. Send the handout home with students or pass it out to parents at Back-to-School-Night. I've even had business cards made with my site's address printed on them. On a grander scale, registering your site with some of the major search engines is a great way to get word of your site out onto the World Wide Web. *Add Me* (<http://www.addme.com>) provides the free service of registering your site for you on 30 top search engines.

*Eduhound Classrooms on the Web*

(<http://www.eduhoundclassroomsontheweb.com>) in another free service that allows you to submit your site and view other examples of quality classroom websites.