





























- Have an open mind when it comes to arguments on the internet, and show respect for others in every response

Whereas digital citizenship can typically be taught, because much of it has to do with the rules of netiquette and other expected polite and professional practices, leadership needs to be owned by the students themselves. One way to help students along, however, is very simple. As a teacher, you need to model digital leadership yourself in your day to day instruction and interactions.

As a teacher, you can help your students by telling them about how you use the internet as a leader. You can relate examples of how you've handled online arguments, how you've posted to praise and support others, and how you've learned more about the world by having an open mind and reading varied sources to learn the different aspects of nuanced stories.

You can assign your students projects to help them develop these necessary leadership skills. Alternatively, you can simply make it clear to your students that you are open to hearing and helping when they want to 'run with' a project, support another student, learn more about a subject, or otherwise do a deep-dive into something that really matters to them.

From a strictly utilitarian point of view, future colleges and employers love to see stories of students taking the initiative to do good in their communities. However, in a much more real sense, by giving your students the tools to become digital leaders, you're helping them become the people they need to be—and helping influence even larger groups of people, through them, to try to do their part to make the world a slightly better place (Plemmons, 2019).

## **The Rules of Netiquette**

If your students are going to become good citizens of the internet, that involves learning and following the distinct rules that can make the web a safe and enjoyable place to be. These rules - or 'internet etiquette', often shortened to 'netiquette' - are often summarized as follows:

1. **Think carefully about the tone of your words.** When we speak, we're able to pretty naturally modulate how something sounds, which has a direct impact on how our words are perceived. On the internet, with the exception of videos, everything is text-based. It can be much more difficult to make a joke or show emotion safely because the subtext and nuance that can make those more complicated communications

possible is often lost on people on the other side of the screen. In many cases, jokes are often taken as rude, and simple statements are perceived as subtle threats. To alleviate this wherever possible, teach your students to think twice (and very carefully) about capitalization, italics, and other modes of differentiating text. An innocuous statement interpreted poorly can make the difference between a helpful conversation online and a horrendous argument waiting to happen.

2. **Prioritize accuracy whenever you're making statements online.** The internet is a vast place that is full of incredible amounts of information. There is also a lot of misinformation to be found. If your student has found a piece of information that seems suspect, he or she has a responsibility not to share it, thereby amplifying the number of people who are being misinformed. Teach your students to do their own research, and to be very sure of the factual nature of anything they plan to post online. There are usually very simple ways to fact-check any data that your students plan to use, but they do need to be aware of these methods and the importance of using them. Part of being a good digital citizen is not leading other people astray with badly chosen facts. Help your students have the means to choose well whenever they post online.
3. **As a rule, impress upon your students the importance of searching for their own data and answers online before posting a question to social media.** This is secondary to the previous point, but bears mentioning! Almost everyone uses or has access to the internet. Each user has a different history, educational experience, bias, and familiarity with any topic that you'd be interested in knowing more about. Throwing a question out into the void of the internet, therefore, can bring back incredibly diverse and perhaps only marginally helpful answers. Before students decide to do this, it's a good idea to have them ask a teacher or parent for an answer, or specifically to do research in reliable, trustworthy online databases.
4. **It's a good idea to be as polite as you are in person when you're communicating online.** (Imagine how many social media comment wars would be very different if we all followed this rule!) Teach your students to remember that individuals on the internet are real people behind computers or phones, and to treat them as such. They shouldn't say anything to an online avatar that they wouldn't be comfortable saying to someone's face. This principle alone would likely greatly reduce the amount of cyberbullying that many students face, so make sure to reiterate it when you're going over digital citizenship with your students.

5. **When your students are writing online, they should always use proper grammar and punctuation to convey their thoughts and comments most efficiently.** As the saying goes, you need to learn the rules before you can break them - so students need to learn how to communicate properly online before they can (or should) start using abbreviations, emoticons, and gifs. Regardless of what students do in their spare time, it's a good idea to enforce completely correct punctuation and grammar in all school-related online communications. To influence what your students do on the internet when off-campus, remind your students that good punctuation and grammar vastly improve their online perception. When students use English correctly, they're seen as smart, reliable, trustworthy, and professional. (It can also help to show your students that correct use of text does not have to be mutually exclusive with humor or wit).
6. **Stress to your students the importance of staying on topic.** If there's a discussion happening on a social media post or in an email chain, one of the least helpful ways to derail the productivity of that conversation is to bring up a different topic. Make sure that whenever your students post a comment, they're using that opportunity to bring something helpful and relevant to the conversation. It'll be that much more helpful for the original poster, and it'll help your students become better conversationalists both on- and off-line.
7. **It's very important that your students remember that there is no such thing as privacy on the internet!** The second your students post something, it's going to be around for a long time. They need to know that even if they delete posts, there may still be a record of them somewhere - and, regardless, they won't know if someone saw a post and took a picture of it before it went down! Because of this, your students need to develop a little bit of perspective or foresight about what is permissible to be posted - and what won't be helpful for their future selves. It's impossible to look into the future, so a good rule of thumb for your students is to steer clear of anything that might be rude or inappropriate when posting.
8. **That said, when your students begin interacting with others on the internet, they should be aware that they need to afford other people as much privacy as they can.** Even though your students may have access to the personal information of others (such as whereabouts, social media handles, pictures, or email addresses), they shouldn't share any of that with another person without explicit permission. It may feel like a very safe interaction - for example, just sharing a picture with a friend, or passing a student's contact information to another teacher - but students always need



to respect that other people have the right to moderate access to this type of personal data. Teach your students to always ask for permission before distributing any information online that involves another person.

9. **Finally, just as your students need to respect the privacy of others, they also need to learn to respect other people's opinions online.** Your students may have already encountered the fact that they will not always agree with other people in real life. They may have developed a system for acting polite in a face to face situation, even if they strongly feel that another person is wrong. Because the internet offers relative anonymity and ease of communication, your students may not have a similar system for respecting different opinions online. Teach your students that they can disagree with others but respect their right to express themselves at the same time. It's a trite saying, but the old 'if you can't say anything nice, say nothing' may be a good rule of thumb to follow on the internet (UOTP Marketing, 2020).

## Conclusion

Becoming and being a good digital citizen and leader may not seem like the most academic of pursuits. However, the reality of modern life reflects the fact that the internet is here to stay - and, increasingly, schools and businesses are conducting their day-to-day tasks and communications online.

In addition, your students likely spend a good amount of time navigating social media and other online resources. Giving your students the tools to wade through the vast amount of information on the internet isn't an optional extra in your classroom; it's necessary assistance to ensure that your student is able to go through modern life with ease. Strategizing with your students to ensure that they're able to contribute to the online discourse, support causes about which they are passionate, and keep themselves and others safe, is certainly a priority for every 21st-century classroom.

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