

A Guide to the Internet

What is the Internet?

A group of computers linked together to share and exchange resources and information is called a local network. The Internet (short for **I**nternational **N**etwork), is a vast number of local networks all over the world connected to each other, in such a way that it is possible for someone using one of these computers to access information on any of the other computers. This system was originally set up by in US Government and Universities, for the fast transfer of information around the world from one computer to another.

It is quite simple for any other person, outside these local networks, to connect to the Internet. All that is needed is: a reasonably up-to-date computer, and an account with one of the many companies which will connect you to the rest of the **I**nternational **N**etwork. (These companies are called Internet Service Providers).

What is the World Wide Web (WWW)?

Universities, colleges, the media, businesses, and indeed any individual, can prepare and make information available to others on the World Wide Web, (WWW). Information is presented on special "web pages" that can be viewed on screen, in the form of text, colours, graphics, photos, animations, sound and video. For example the BBC has a "web site" containing hundreds of web pages. These pages collectively make up what is known as the World Wide Web. Unlike the pages in a book, these web pages often "link" to several other pages which contain related information. It is possible for one web page to link to dozens of other pages. These could be "served" on to the "web" from computers anywhere in the world. Moving from one page to another is called browsing or surfing the web.

Many of these pages contain information which can be useful in a classroom. Some web sites are designed specifically for pupils in schools. Indeed, more and more schools are themselves building their own web sites. Many school web sites describe the school's activities to outsiders or explain project work that pupils may be involved in.

What is Electronic Mail or email?

This is just a way of sending messages from one person to another via the Internet. Each Internet user has a unique e-mail address. You'll see @ in the middle of it. A text message sent can be read moments later, or next time the recipient connects to the Internet. Electronic documents, such as text, graphics, sound or photo files can also be attached and sent with the message.

What are Newsgroups?

These are collections of electronic messages written for public readership rather than addressed to any one individual. Each newsgroup is about a particular interest or theme. Individuals can reply to these messages and these replies are also public. It is possible to follow a multi-way conversation (or "thread") about the issue of the day. It's a bit like a public notice board for each specific news group. There are well over 100,000 news groups, on topics from cooking to air-sports, from educational IT to celebrity fan clubs etc. A lot of concern about undesirable material on the Internet refers to certain news groups. However, pupils will rarely use any newsgroups, and as you need to subscribe to any particular group before it's possible to access material, these are the easiest to restrict.

What are Chatrooms?

Chatrooms are a means by which users can exchange text messages with a group of random other Internet users. Some chat rooms are set up by groups with specific interests while others are open to anybody. It is very easy to pretend to be something or somebody else when communicating solely through text. There is therefore great concern about pupils using chat rooms as they could easily be exposed to people of dubious intent.

Pupils in schools should only be allowed access to chatrooms set up by educational establishments such as the London Grid for Learning and / or Gridclub. These are safe and controlled by teachers. Other chatrooms are not safe.

What are the dangers of the Internet?

It is true that there is material on the Internet that would be offensive to most people. Any person using the Internet unsupervised can access any of this. If you start off by looking at the something like the BBC web site, and follow links to other sites, it is highly unlikely that you will encounter anything offensive. But by using keywords on a site that performs a search for you, it only takes seconds to reach extremely offensive material.

Software is available that will prevent access to most offensive sites, and some can be quite effective. However as yet none of these programs can possibly offer 100% guaranteed that access will be denied.

All London schools that connect to the London Grid for Learning access the Internet via a filtered service which filters out known sites of offensive material. However, as sites come and go so quickly on the WWW this is a task which is never totally achievable. *As a general rule pupils should not access the Internet without supervision by adults.*

We feel a combination of site-filtering, supervision and of fostering a responsible attitude in our pupils, is most likely to provide the best recipe for success.

How can I get more information?

There are many books and magazines in newsagents that cater for beginners and advanced users of the Internet. If you have any specific questions please contact your school's ICT co-ordinator.

The "Parents Information Network" produces a free guide:
PO Box 16934
LONDON SE1 3ZP

Website:

<http://www.parentscentre.gov.uk/usingcomputersandtheinternet/>

<http://www.gridclub.com/freearea/tasters/cybercafe/base.htm>