

# School Library Website Components

by Odin Jurkowski

*“Don’t frustrate students by designing a flashy site that is difficult for them to use.”*

School library websites are a necessity. The earliest adopters have now had almost 10 years for development and redesign. Many sites have gone through numerous iterations with major improvements each time. During the last couple of years we’ve seen these sites expand into almost all the schools, becoming integrated into everyday life for our students and colleagues. There are of course a few last holdouts that have not made that leap yet, but issues of cost, time, technology and training have made the discussion more a matter of deciding what to include and how to structure the sites than of whether to have a website or not. While most current library media specialists went to school before web design became a topic of course content, those in school now are expected to learn at least some of the basics.

The technical aspects of designing a good school library website are, therefore, not the largest hurdle any longer. While there are certainly more advanced features that would be nice to include, most sites consist of a place to make available links to databases and other websites and a way to post information and documents created in the library and the school. Additional time and money could produce richer websites with more features, but the needs of most students can be met inexpensively by school librarians.

A somewhat difficult hurdle is the actual design and organization of the website. There are countless ways that this type of information can be organized, and the ages of the students can have a major impact. A K-12 school, for instance, has very different needs for its younger and older students. In this case, separate paths may have to be created to direct students toward age appropriate resources. Simple and easy to follow structure is important. Don’t frustrate students by designing a flashy site that is difficult for them to use.

The most difficult part is adding the content, especially providing quality resources and websites to link to. This takes a lot of time. Each link to a website needs to be thoroughly evaluated, and constantly checked for dead links.

The advantage of the medium is that you are not entirely on your own when deciding what to put on your own site. You don’t have to reinvent the wheel. So what are other library media specialists really doing on a day-to-day basis? What have they created? What are some of the basic components of a good school library website? This paper will provide a list of current features many websites contain, and some interesting ideas that others may want to incorporate.

There are entire subfields of website design which talk about navigation, colors, organization, readability and much more. However, while technical issues and design techniques cross disciplines and types of websites, there are specific concerns when talking about school library websites. This paper focuses on content of websites, about which there is currently very little research published. What we are considering here is what makes a good school library website in

terms of information and resources for its users. Simpson (2003) includes the following components in no particular order: email link to the library media specialist, hours, mission, goals, school name, phone number, databases, online catalog, internet resources and pathfinders.

In reviewing the best school library websites, Minkel (2003) stresses the following features: photos of the library and people there, recommended books and websites, staff information, online databases and reference materials and research information. A separate “teacher assignments” page is also useful to guide students directly to information and resources used in collaboration with teachers (Minkel, 2000).

One of the best ways to determine what to include is by looking at other sites. There will always be variations and individual differences including links to websites for specific class content, but overall the main features of school library websites should be fairly similar.

## Methodology

Thirty-four school library websites of varying sizes from around the state of Missouri were analyzed during the fall of 2003. A simple content analysis of their features was tabulated by the author, and frequency tables with corresponding percentages were calculated. These observations represent a snapshot of current school library websites at this point in time.

## Findings

The first area of website features that were observed included basic functions that you would expect to find on any website regardless of the site’s purpose (see Table 1). Basic information included how to contact the webmaster (44%), who the employees are (68%), and how to reach the library media center via phone (26%), address (32%), and email (68%). A date for when the pages were last updated (53%) also indicates if the site has been kept current. These features strengthen the validity of the site, and we tell our students to look for such features when evaluating websites for their own research. These are common features and site developers should strive to include them on 100% of all websites. However, as shown in the results, this guideline is still not followed consistently.

The next group of website features consists of those more specific to school libraries (see Table 2). It would seem that most of these should be commonplace, but there is a lack of consistency here also. We may expect that some of these features would be more dominant for different grade levels. Databases, for example, were found on 76% of the sites but would not really be needed for 1st graders. However, since many states (like Missouri) provide a certain number of databases at no cost to the schools, it would be beneficial to link to these databases especially since the teachers may want to access them. Furthermore, certain features require greater costs and technical expertise. Some schools may not have transitioned to an OPAC (Online Public Access Catalog – an electronic card catalog) that is web accessible (only 35% have). In all, many items were surprisingly low.

Some of the features that should really be available on almost all school library sites include lists of website links (79%), policies (47%), mission statement (18%), library news (12%) and a print journal list (3%). To save with printing costs and for ease of updating, these features become a source of information about the library itself, and can easily be kept current. While a student or teacher can always see what journals are available by walking to the library, and they may even be incorporated into the OPAC, nothing beats having that list available and easy to read, especially when we are only looking at a relatively small number of titles. It

<u>Feature</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Email	68
Employees	68
Last Updated	53
Webmaster	44
Address	32
Phone	26

Table 1. Basic features in use on school library websites

was also quite surprising that not all sites had at least some web links as this is the ideal place to provide this information.

Certain information is useful not only for the content within, but for collaboration, publicity and promotion. Library news (12%) ensures that everyone realizes how much work and effort librarians and staff have been putting into making improvements and providing services. A list or descriptions of the type of equipment available in the library media center (15%) also makes it easier to inform teachers about what exactly is offered. If they don't know what is available, they won't ask to use it. This also goes for posting new materials that have arrived (3%). Displays in the library are great eye catchers, but having that information online is very handy.

Other features such as class resources (12%), whether links to websites or documents and materials posted on the site, provide a convenient place for sharing information in one place rather than spread among different systems or lost from year-to-year. These websites tied to specific classes or teachers are a bit different than other standard lists of websites that are useful for general library research. There is also something nice about having longer lists of websites

divided into several groups by topic for easier browsing. Having policies (47%) available is also a good idea, as then everyone can clearly see how best to follow the library rules. Even if students and teachers don't look at the policies before coming to the library, at least it will be easy for you to point out policies when needed.

Many libraries also have pages dedicated to certain awards (29%). While the type of awards may vary because of the schools age levels, the three big awards listed most frequently in Missouri were the Mark Twain Award, the ShowMe Reader Award and the Gateway Award. Since these are such great publicity tools, and so often incorporated in library and classroom lessons, having this information readily available is an asset.

The next section of features consists of websites by content area (see Table 3). Since all library sites should contain links to other resources, some type of subcategories or grouping must be done in order to not overwhelm the student. This will also vary from school to school, but the following is a breakdown of what was found.

Feature	Percentage
Website Links	79
Databases	76
Policies	47
OPAC	35
Websites by Subject	35
Awards	29
Mission	18
Calendar/Schedule	15
Equipment	15
Library News	12
Specific Class Resources	12
Journal List	3
New Acquisitions	3

Table 2. Common library research features on school library websites

You can see how search engines (71%), reference links (65%) and news sites (56%) dominated websites found on school library websites. Teacher sites (41%) are very useful as a way of encouraging collaboration and getting the teachers to use the library website. Once they are there to use those links, they may look for further resources and come to you for assistance. Links specifically used by the library media specialist (18%) are much more convenient than bookmarks on a computer since you can access them from anywhere. Since you are creating a library website, it makes perfect sense to take advantage of the web space and create something for what you use as well.

Other than those, specific subcategories when provided included research (32%), career or college (29%), weather (26%), government (18%), health (12%), online magazines (18%) and homework help (21%). As a website grows, it's expected that some type of organizational scheme needs to be developed. It's a given that books follow Dewey, and other materials like videos, DVDs, games, toys and other miscellaneous items all have several major ways of storage and classification. However, when it comes to the newness of websites there are still many different variations of the main theme of separating the links into subject categories.

Finally, we found some very interesting features on school library websites that you might want to consider including in yours. They ranged from the practical

(Accelerated Reader lists) that other schools may want to incorporate into their own, to truly unique (Philosopher's Corner, Internet Hoaxes and Urban Legends) (see Table 4).

## Conclusion

One of the best ways of trying to decide what to include in your own website is to simply look at what other people are doing. Incorporate the best into your own. Therefore, the more you look, the better representation you can find. Looking at two or three sites is better than none, and looking at 10 is even better. Browsing through the results of this article provides a bit more of a comprehensive overview. While each library has their own needs, and some things can not be done as easily or inexpensively as others (a web accessible OPAC, for example), most of what has been shown here can be done by everyone. I would suggest that each and every library strive to include as many of these basic components that they can. We can see what types of features are more prevalent, and those may be the items to first ensure that you include in your site. However, all of these features are good ideas, and a good website will include as much of these as it can in order to better serve the students.

From a practical standpoint, the first step to creating or revising an existing site is to determine what exactly you want to include and do with the website. Then you would decide if an existing site could be modified or if it would require so much change that you need to start from scratch. Most websites will go through periods of change in which major overhauls in design and organization take place every few years. One of the problems that people run into is that once they have a site, they don't want to change it. The thought of rebuilding it seems daunting; they may not feel like there is time, or they've become attached to using it as it exists. Ideally you want to design a website upfront instead of trying to patch it together after the fact. Like any good designer or teacher knows, thorough planning in the beginning makes for a much smoother process. Once the structure is intact, you can focus on adding content, including links to resources, and planning a regular schedule for updating and adding more. It's a never ending process, and requires that time be set aside on a regular basis.

Larger organizations and institutions are moving toward having the structure and design of their websites created by outside companies that have the skills to create impressive-looking designs. That leaves content and updating to people in house. It is unclear at this point if this trend will follow for schools. Because of budgetary issues most of the work is currently almost always done entirely in house. Regardless, content and the types of features to include are the main issues the school librarian needs to be concerned with. A basic understanding of web page design, visual literacy and

Feature	Percentage
Search Engines	71
Reference Links	65
News/Newspapers	56
Teacher Sites	41
Research Links	32
Career/College	29
Weather	26
Homework Help	21
Government	18
Librarian Links	18
Online Magazines	18
Health	12

Table 3. Subcategories used to group links to other resources on school library websites

AR lists
Archives (yearbooks, student newspapers, etc.)
Author Pages
Bibliography Help, Citing Sources
Book Club
Book Fairs
Book Request for Purchase (form, email, etc.)
Copyright for Kids
Copyright for Teachers
Displays
ebooks Links
Events (Teen Read Week, Literature Festival)
Floppy Disk Care Guide
Friends of the Library
Fun Links; Game Sites; Cool Sites
Hours
Internet Hoaxes
Map, Floor Plan
Missouri Links
Movie Reviews
Other libraries, public and academic

Table 4. Other interesting features found on school library websites

html are required, and software can be obtained inexpensively. More complex programming skills would be a plus, but assistance in those areas can always be found from elsewhere. While design and appearance cannot be overlooked, school librarians are already well versed in structure and organization, and they are the ones that have the knowledge about what content to include. Hopefully studies like this will continue to keep school library webmasters up to date.

*Dr. Odin Jurkowski recently completed his doctorate in instructional technology, and holds master's degrees in both library science and in technical communications. He is an assistant professor at Central Missouri State University and teaches in the graduate program of Library Science & Information Services within the department of Educational Leadership & Human Development.*

*“One of the best ways of trying to decide what to include in your own website is to simply look at what other people are doing.”*

## Links

School Libraries on the Web

<http://www.sldirectory.com/index.html>

IASL School Library Web Page Award Winners

[http://www.iasl-slo.org/web\\_winners.html](http://www.iasl-slo.org/web_winners.html)

IASL: Creating a web page for your school library

<http://www.iasl-slo.org/creatingweb.html>

## References

Minkel, W. (2000). A site for sore eyes: Birmingham Groves (MI) High School Media Center. *School Library Journal*, 46(5), 38.

Minkel, W. (2003). The best school sites. *Library Journal*, 19, 38.

Simpson, C. (2003). The school library web page: Functional or fluff. *Media & Methods*, 39(3), 40-41.



# Your time hasn't run out yet!

If you missed the **AECT Leadership & Technology Conventions** in Chicago, Anaheim, Dallas, or Atlanta, those cutting-edge presentations are still available.

To order your copy of the proceedings, contact us at the AECT office.

Call 1-877-677-2328 or check online at [www.aect.org](http://www.aect.org).

Copyright of TechTrends: Linking Research & Practice to Improve Learning is the property of Association for Educational Communications & Technology and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.