

Quick Tips

for

Searching the Internet

Getting Started

The Internet is a vast, worldwide collection of computer networks that allows people to find and use information and communicate with others. Navigating such a large amount of information can be intimidating and time-consuming. This Quick Tip is designed to help you search the Internet effectively and provides guidelines for evaluating the information you find.

Subject Directories

Subject directories are the “card catalogs” of the Internet. They are structured hierarchically and filtered by people who decide what to include or exclude. They are very useful for finding information on a general topic and are excellent starting points for locating Web sites. Many of the subject directories are also searchable. *Example subject directories include yahoo.com, about.com or msn.com.*

Search Engines

Search engines are computer-driven and are able to index a huge amount of information on the Web. Because of this, they often contain a lot of irrelevant information and it can be difficult to wade through the rubbish to find the quality pages. Search engines are far more comprehensive than subject directories. *Some search engine sites include altavista.com, google.com, hotbot.com, or wisenut.com.*

Common Search Operators

When you search the web, you perform what's called a query. You can use search operators to narrow your search. Search operators are symbols, word, and punctuation that make searches more specific.

Quotation marks (“ ”)	You may enclose a query with one or more words in quotation marks. This ensures that you get results that contain only the full query (as opposed to just some of the words). Ex. “service learning”
Plus sign (+)	This works similarly to quotation marks. It allows you to search for sites that contain two or more words. But unlike the quotation marks, there's no guarantee that the words may necessarily be near each other.
Minus sign (-)	This allows you to search for sites and exclude a topic or word (ex. clinton -lewinski).

Note: Once you've mastered adding, subtracting and quotation marks, you can combine symbols to easily create more targeted searches. (Ex. clinton -lewinsky +library)

Metasearch Tools

Metasearch tools will search multiple search engines and subject directories simultaneously. While this at first appears a quick method of finding what you want, there are some disadvantages. First, since different search tools use different syntax, search results are not as precise. Secondly, the metasearch tool will grab only a handful of results from each search tool and the results are not as comprehensive as when you search the search engines and subject directories individually. *Example metasearch sites include webcrawler.com, dogpile.com, and metacrawler.com.*

Viewing Results & Evaluating Quality

It is important to remember that anyone can publish on the World Wide Web. This means that the quality of the information you find on the Web must be evaluated very carefully. For a journal article to be published it usually goes through peer review before it is accepted for publication. With a book you can judge quality by the reputation of the publisher. With no quality controls in place for Internet publication, you must evaluate the information you find on the Web very closely. Consider the following points with your analysis.

When was the document created? Has it been updated?

Be wary of information which doesn't provide any date of publication.

Who is the author? Is there a link to his/her credentials?

Check the author's credentials. How do you know that he/she has the knowledge to supply this information? If there are no credentials available either try a search for the author's name on one of the search engines.

What sort of content is there?

Consider how comprehensive the content is. Look at the links to other documents to see if they lead to other relevant documents. Consider the intended audience: what level is the information (e.g. aimed at a primary school student or a university student)? Consider the bias of the information.

What sort of site has allowed this information to be published?

The URL (Uniform Resource Locator) or address of the document can be easily dissected. You can identify the type of organization by looking at the last part of the address (the host address). The following are the most common types.

.edu	educational	Educational institutions will contain a range of information from serious research to fun student pages.
.gov	governmental	Government sites can usually be depended on for reputable information.
.com & .net	commercial	Commercial sites are trying to sell a product so may offer a 'hook' of good information to attract you to their site, but consider the ulterior motive!
.org	organization (usually non-profit)	Evaluate organizational sites individually as information reliability depends on the organization's reputation and purpose.

How does the content compare with traditional resources?

It is still important to use the more traditional resources available in libraries. Not all information is available on the World Wide Web.