Web Search Tips

We all use Internet search engines, like Google or Yahoo, to search for information, whether it’s for a research paper or just to answer that nagging question. But how can we better search the Web to ensure we don’t have to sift through hundreds of thousands (or millions) or results to find what we are looking for? Listed below are a few hints for making your Internet searches more efficient.

Basic Vs. Advanced Searching

Most search engines have two search engine options: a basic search (also called default or keyword) and an advanced search. A basic search engine looks for the occurrence of the search terms anywhere in a record. The advanced search engine, on the other hand, allows for a more targeted search by using different indexes (author, title, subject, etc.) and limits such as date range, material type, language, and library. In both searches, you can use wildcard characters, Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT), and nested searching using parentheses.

Phrases within Quotation Marks

Putting a phrase in quotation marks means only those sites that contain that exact phrase will be retrieved by the search engine. For example, search "Minnesota Vikings" will return results with “Minnesota” and “Vikings” in the order typed rather than separately.

Capital Letters

Most search engines retrieve both lower case and capitalized words if you type your request in lower case letters. Capitalizing proper names usually reduces the number of items retrieved. General dynamics will get different results than will general Dynamics in most search engines.

Boolean Operators

Most search engines have an advanced or power search mode that lets you combine terms in specific ways to increase the likelihood of finding what you are looking for. The following three terms used between search terms produce very different results:

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| AND      | Searches for items where all of the terms appear. More inclusive with fewer results.  
           | Example: university AND achievement |
| + (plus sign) | This is used in Google instead of AND.  
<pre><code>               | Example: university + achievement |
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| **OR** | Searches for all the search terms listed. The more terms listed the more results you get.  
*Example:* information OR literacy OR media |
| **NOT** | Removes certain words from the search. Allows you to limit result you might not want.  
*Example:* library NOT school |
| **- (minus sign)** | This is used in Google instead of NOT.  
*Example:* library - school |

**Truncation**

An asterisk (*) or exclamation point (!) at the end of a string of letters (check the help page of the specific search engine for which it uses) means the search will find all words beginning with that string of letters. For example, institut* retrieves institute, institution, institutional.

**Be careful about truncating a word with the * that could have lots of endings in foreign languages.** It might be a good idea to limit the language of a search if you truncate.

**Languages**

Most search engines allow you to specify the language to which you wish to limit your search. Some also provide English translation for foreign language Web pages.

**Dates**

Most search engines allow you to limit your search to a range of dates, which can help reduce the number of “hits.”