Web Research & Evaluation

Search Tips

Web search engines (Google, Yahoo, Bing) use algorithms—complex computer formulas—to transform your keywords into relevant search results. While search engines are getting increasingly good at returning meaningful results based on our keyword choices, here are some tips and tricks to help you improve your keyword searches:

**Keep it Simple**
Choose only essential keywords. Skip nonessential words like about, information, etc. Change up your keywords to get different results.

For information about gas drilling in the state of California, enter: gas drilling California or...
“offshore drilling” California

**Focus In**
Narrow your search topic—and get more relevant results—by adding keywords that more closely describe what you are looking for.

For information about the risks of drilling rigs, enter:
drilling rigs then add other terms like environmental hazards, oil spills, etc.

**Be Specific**
“Quotation marks” around phrases tell Google (or Bing or Yahoo or your favorite search tool) to find that exact phrase, exactly as entered.

Examples with quotation marks:
“The Fall of the House of Usher”
“factory farming”
“student loan debt”
“fast food”

Advanced Tips

- **OR = More:** Combining related words and synonyms with OR tells your search engine to find results with any one of the words you entered. Example:
  fracking OR “hydraulic fracturing” OR “natural gas drilling”

- **Thesaurus:** Use a thesaurus to get ideas about synonyms, or other words that are used for the same thing (e.g., cat & feline). Try thesaurus.com or merriam-webster.com.

- **Beyond Google:** Try a specialty search engine, such as Google’s Scholar database (scholar.google.com) or subject-focused tool such as medlineplus.gov for health topics or artcyclopedia.com for art topics. Consult a librarian to learn about specialty search engines in your area of study.
A Little Bit about Domains …

On the web, the term domain refers to the (usually) three-letter extension at the end of a web address, also known as a URL (uniform resource locator). Domains can tell you a bit about the type of site you are looking at before you even begin reading content. Here are some of the most common types:

- .com commercial site
- .org non-profit organizational site
- .edu educational site
- .gov government site
- .mx, .ca, .uk Country designations (Mexico, Canada, United Kingdom)

Check It Out: Web Site Evaluation

We all know the web is full of valuable information, and most of us start with a search engine when we’re looking up local restaurants, movie show times and deals on electronics. Searching for sources for school-related research, however, requires a little more investigation. Because anyone can publish anything on the web, it’s useful to apply the following criteria to web sources you might use in your papers and research projects.

**URL (web address):**
Does the site’s domain (.edu, etc.) reveal anything about the content on the page? Don’t assume all .org or .edu sites automatically give credible information. Remember, some very reputable sources, such as The New York Times, are .com sites (nytimes.com)

**Authorship & Sponsorship:**
Who is responsible for the site? Academic researchers? People posting their personal experiences in blogs or forums? Is the page affiliated with any professional organizations or companies? How might those organizations influence what is published on the site? Look for “about” sections to find information about the site’s producers.

**Accuracy:**
Does the info on this site seem accurate to you? Does it include references so you can verify the website’s claims?

**Objectivity:**
Are the site producers trying to sell you something? Do they have a religious or political agenda that would influence their content? Does the site try to present all sides of an issue, or only try to convince you their perspective is correct? Lastly, does the site have references to external sources through links or footnotes?

**Currency:**
How current is the info on the site? Look for a date of publication or “last update.” How important is timeliness to your topic?