

How to Use Search Engines Effectively



Search engines are databases of billions of web sites. Although they are similar in the way that they retrieve information, there are differences that users need to know in order to fully use the search engine's capacity.

The Spider's Apprentice

The Spider's Apprentice or *Spidap* is not a search engine but a web page to help students understand search engines. The activities are worth exploring:

<http://www.monash.com/spidap.html>

Google

Google has the largest database of web pages, including many other types of web documents (PDFs, Word, Excel, PowerPoint). Sometimes Google is not enough. Less than half the searchable web is fully searchable in Google.

<http://www.google.com>

Virtual Library

The following site is an almost exhaustive list of search engines, metasearch engines, and subject directories:

<http://mciu.org/~spjvweb/searchtip.html>

Basic Search Strategy

How to structure a good search engine query:

- Brainstorm several key words and phrases—the ones that would appear in the document.
- Also consider the words that should NOT appear in the document—for instance when researching the planet Saturn, eliminate references to cars and automobiles. With Dolphins, avoid football.
- Put the most important words and phrases first.
- Consider phrases—which words are likely to appear next to each other in exact order in good results? Names like “Martin Luther King” or “vitamin A.”
- Focus on nouns (verbs are often vague and articles--a, an, the--are ignored by most engines).
- Consider alternate forms of words (truncate when possible): adolesc* for adolescent, adolescents, adolescence.
- Check the spelling. Bad spelling usually turns up bad hits.

- Follow “more like this” leads when you get a good result.
- Good searchers use advanced search screens. They offer far more power and precision. Use Boolean operators when you can.
- Mine result lists for important words, names, and phrases that were not included originally.

Additional sources of information about search engines can be found at:

<http://kidsclick.org/>

<http://lii.org/>

<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/SearchEngines.html>

<http://www.webliminal.com/search/10steps.htm>