

Introducing Search Skills

The Internet is a great source of information on all kinds of topics. But sometimes it's *too* good: there's so much information out there, it can be hard to find just what you're looking for.

Most of the time we use **search engines** like Google, Bing or Yahoo to help us find information. Search engines catalogue what's on the Internet, but they're not very smart – they only give you exactly what you ask for. If you're not specific, you won't get the information you want.

Major search engines will also give you some suggestions for search strings as you start typing your keywords. For example, if you start typing “Jacques”, the search engine may display “Jacques Cartier” as one of its suggestions. This can be very useful in cases where you are not sure about the spelling of something but, because these suggestions are based on what other people have searched for, they can also be misleading. (Imagine, for instance, if you were searching for Samuel de Champlain and the search engine decided you wanted information on Samuel L. Jackson.)

No single search engine can cover everything on the Internet and different search engines will give you different results. For that reason, it's a good idea to use more than one. If you can't find what you are looking for using a particular search engine, try another or a search engine that compiles results from many different search engines (like www.dogpile.com). Three of the main search engines are:

1. www.google.com
2. www.yahoo.com
3. www.bing.com

There are also some kid-friendly search engines that *filter* their searches (by blocking out stuff they think isn't right for kids to see) or *curate* content (by making lists of things they think are good sources for kids):

1. <http://www.kidsclick.org/>
2. <http://www.factmonster.com/>

Most of these search engines have advanced options that let you look for certain types of information like images, news articles and videos.

There is, however, a lot of information that search engines **don't** catalog. For example, the books in your local library's database, the collection at a local museum, or the information in an online dictionary such as the Larousse (<http://www.larousse.com/en/dictionaries>). In those cases, you have to search the information they have directly from their websites.



Narrowing Your Search

There are ways you can pre-filter search engine results before you even type in a keyword! Once installed or activated, these filtering programs will automatically filter out most of the inappropriate stuff on the Internet. You don't have to do anything special: just type in your search as you normally do.

Although search engines are getting smarter at guessing what you want based on the keywords you type in, sometimes you need to be more specific in your search and give the search engine additional instructions to help it find exactly what you are looking for. You can do this in two ways: by using the "advanced search" feature of the search engine or special keywords.

Automatic Filters

Here are some of the ways you can have your computer automatically filter websites:

- Turn on the "safe search" option:
 - In Google, this is done by visiting www.google.com/preferences and then checking the box marked "Filter explicit results" and then clicking the "Save" button at the bottom of the page.
 - In Bing, visit <http://www.bing.com/account/general> and select the "Strict" or "Moderate" button.
 - It's only possible to set Safe Search settings in Yahoo! if you have a Yahoo! account. If you do, you can log in, go to <http://search.yahoo.com/preferences/preferences> and select "Strict" or "Moderate".
- Install a piece of software that will filter the sites that any search engine returns.
- Use bookmarks – that way, you know exactly where you are going!

Many of these filters only keep out things that are offensive, so even though you get fewer results, they may not be **better** results. For better results you need the tools below.

Advanced Search Tricks

The words you use in a search engine are called your **search terms**. All of them together are called a **search string**. In general, the **more precise words** you include in your search, the better your results will be.

When you type more than one keyword in a search engine, like:

big yellow balloon

the search engine will return any pages it finds that have **all** the keywords you typed somewhere on the page – even if these words aren't next to each other! For example, if a page has this sentence:

Eric had a **big** dream: one day he would rent a hot air **balloon** and fly over the **Yellow** River in China.

it will show up in your results.

Those words aren't even in the same order! You only want pages that talk about big yellow balloons — how can you tell this to the search engine?



You can tell most search engines to do a more specific search: most search engines will let you add special symbols and words to your search that limit the results. These are “ ”, – (or **NOT**), and **OR**.

- You can search for a whole phrase by putting quotes around it. This means you will get only pages with that exact phrase.
- For example, if you type “**big yellow balloon**”, you will get pages that have those three words together in that order. This means that you won’t get pages that have the same words in a different order (for example “yellow big balloon” or pages with big or yellow or balloon scattered on the page).
- Placing – or **NOT** before a word means that you will only get results that **do not** include that word. This helps eliminate many unnecessary results. For example, if you wanted to see pages that talked about games but not video games, you could type one of these search strings:

Example 1: **game –video**

Example 2: **game NOT video**

- Including **OR** between two words means that you will get results that include either word. This is good when you have two words that mean the same (or almost the same) thing that a search engine might not recognize. For example, it can be useful when there are two different names for the same thing or person:

Example: “Katniss Everdeen” **OR** “Jennifer Lawrence”

Example: Blackbeard **OR** “Edward Teach”

Example: Holland **OR** “The Netherlands”

You can also do the same types of searches without using these special symbols by choosing the “Advanced Search” feature of most search engines, but it’s usually faster and easier to use special keywords in your search string.

Example of a Successful Search String

Let’s say you want to find out why your dog’s nose is hot.

You might start just by entering the search string: **hot dog nose**

With these keywords you will only get links to pages that include all three words (but they won’t always be next to each other).

Unfortunately, you are probably getting lots of links about hot dogs (the food). To make sure you get only pages that don’t include the words “hot” and “dog” together, in that order, you can enter:

hot dog nose –“hot dog”

But suppose there’s a band called “The Dog Noses” whose latest song is called “Hot Potato”. A lot of your hits might be about them instead of your topic, so you can add a limiting term: **–band**. Your search string now looks like this:

hot dog nose –“hot dog” –band



Now you're getting better hits for your topic, but the information might still be limited: what if you also want to know about puppies' noses getting hot? You can choose the **OR** operator to tell the search engine to look for dogs OR puppies:

hot dog OR puppy nose -"hot dog" -band

Hey! That led right to an article with just the answers you need: <http://pets.webmd.com/features/dogs-hot-nose>.

