

Basic Tips on doing extemp research on the Internet

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1. Spelling Counts.

While this seems obvious, you aren't likely to find what you are looking for unless you give the search engine the right information. If you misspell your search query you will probably find very little. (Unless your misspelling happens to be a common word as well) Some search engines provide suggestions to retype your query but if you botch up the word badly enough or your searching for something that isn't very popular you might find the server will have no advice for you. Those tools are useful but you still need to know what you are looking for. If you get into a dead end check the spelling. If you don't know the spelling you can try some variations on what you think the spelling ought to be or try another search phrase that would give you similar information that could help you get on the right track.

2. Make sure to use quotation marks where appropriate.

In most search engines quotation marks ensure that the terms within the quotation marks are found in the given order. For example searching for "extemp topics" would list pages that had that phrase right next to each other. The same search without the quotes would list pages that have both 'extemp' and 'topics' but not necessarily adjacent. (Note "extemp topics" won't guarantee that they will appear exactly that way. Google for example, ignores the punctuation. Search for "extemp topics" would thus show a site that had the following text:"...extemp. Topics ...") This is very useful when you are looking for specific multiple word phrases rather than a page that just has mentions of the words.

3. Don't waste time searching the same engines over and over again.

In actuality, there aren't very many search engine databases. Google powers itself (of course!), Aol's search, Yahoo (at the moment), Earthlink, and several other minor search engines. Inktomi provides results for Overture, MSN, and various other minor search engines. Alltheweb does results for Lycos, and other minor search engines. Teoma is a division of Ask Jeeves and according provides the results Ask Jeeves. Don't spend your time searching the same databases several times expecting to find different results. You will just be wasting your time.

4. Minimalism is good.

When choosing a search engine try to go with the simpler interface. Don't waste your time with a site like Yahoo or Lycos for which search is secondary. It is much easier to work with a site that is truly dedicated to the search quality. Use Google instead Yahoo and All the Web instead of Lycos. You will waste less time loading garbage that you don't want and the portals like Yahoo frequently don't have the same feature set as sites that are dedicated to search. For example, Google has had their own image search for years but Yahoo only recently added their own image search.

5. More is less.

Virtually all major search engines check require that all the words in the search phrase are on the page in order to be in the results set. Accordingly, the more words in a search phrase the fewer results you will typically have. If you have too few results you should remove the least important words.

6. Less is more (Converse of 5)

A big mistake made by many inexperienced searchers is to enter one or two word phrases and to get frustrated when they can't find what they are looking for. The problem with one or two word phrase often have is that they are so ambiguous that many sites have those words. The server can't read your brain. Accordingly, you will find that unless one of your words is uncommon the result set will be too large to go through all of the pages. If you search for "George W Bush" (with the quotation marks of course!) you are going to find many results. More often than not you probably had something more specific in mind. If you wanted Bush's approval rating you should have done something along the lines of "Bush 'approval rating'" or something similar.

7. Check the advanced search options.

From time to time search engines will add additional options and you should certainly be familiar with them.

8. Turn off the Offensive Content Filters!

A number of search engines have added filtering of results pages to cater to the interests of parents that don't want their children to "accidentally" happen upon objectionable material. (We all know kids will find the stuff anyway if they want) Unfortunately, filters aren't perfect and sometimes filter out perfectly harmless materials. Always make sure that the search engine you are using has the filters off by checking the preferences. This will help maximize your set of results.