


Advanced Searches

Making the Most of Any Search Engine You Use

A **search engine** is any **computer-based tool** you use to find something. This includes **library catalogs, databases, and web searches**. As is true of tools in the real world, learning which search engines work best under different conditions will help you use those research tools more *constructively* and *creatively* in the future.

To *improve* your chances of finding *better* information – information that is more *relevant* to your needs – you should become aware of *more powerful search options* often available to you.

For example, here is a typical **search box**: Search: [\(Advanced\)](#)

The “[Advanced](#)” link is often where you can click to begin to take charge of your search! 

Once you click on it, you will be presented with more search options. Each search engine offers different options.

In addition to “advanced” search modes, there are advanced search techniques you can learn.

Some Techniques to Consider

When searching for information on the Internet, a typical search engine will take your keywords – the words you use to describe a topic – and tries to match them with web pages containing those words in any order.

Sometimes we need to find words in a specific order. This is what we call *searching for a phrase*. To find a phrase, place quotation marks around words like this: “**Bill of Rights**”

A “phrase” in the world of computers can be a title, a person’s name, a consumer product, the name of an organization – *any* sequence of letters and numbers separated by spaces. Major search engines support phrases.

Some words are actually *ignored* by search engines. Words like “to” and “be” and “or” appear so often in web pages that these keywords are usually ignored by search engines. Such keywords are known as **stop words**.

Now, what do you do if you are looking for the famous “To be or not to be” speech by the character Hamlet (from Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet*)? A **phrase search** instructs a search engine to treat the quoted words as a group of words and to report matches for that group. This can help prevent those words from being ignored.

In addition to advanced search modes and phrase searches, some search engines support advanced search commands. For example, at **www.Google.com** you can search for words and phrases in the titles of web pages by using the special **intitle:** command, as in this example: **intitle:“Bill of Rights”**

Another helpful command supported by Google is the **site:** command, which limits searches to a website or type of website (such as a government website, an organization, or educational website). Here is an example of a Google search that looks for government web pages about the “Bill of Rights”: **“Bill of Rights” site:.gov**

The **.gov** part is the **domain**, or last part of a standard web address (as in **www.whitehouse.gov**). Other popular domains include **.com, .org, .us, and .edu**. When looking for educational information, **.edu** is a great choice!

The “**Boolean Operators**” **AND, OR, and NOT** are special words recognized by some search engines, such as AltaVista (**www.av.com**). Use these operators (with parentheses) to group terms together in more specific and logical ways, as in this example: (“First Amendment” **OR** “freedom of speech”) **AND** (laws **NOT** censorship)

Instead of using Boolean Operators, some search engines let you place **plus + and minus – symbols** before words or phrases to *require* or *exclude* those terms in results, as in this example: **+“bestseller list” +fiction –nonfiction**

To determine if a search engine supports any special commands or Boolean Operators, click its “**Help**” or “**FAQ**” (Frequently Asked Questions) or “**More Information**” link if available.

Learning to Improve Your Search Results

When facing potentially millions of search results, we need ways to reduce and improve matches that are reported.

First, when searching, you usually want to be as *specific* as possible. If you are looking for information on the play *Hamlet*, you usually do not start off by doing a *general* search for *drama* (or even *Shakespeare* for that matter).

What exactly do you need? Literary criticism? The complete text of the play? A summary? Details about a speech or a character in the play? Spend some time considering your search terms and **choose them carefully**.

Your search terms ultimately control how many search results you will receive: **General = More. Specific = Less.**

Limiting and Clustering Results

Depending on what search engine you are using, you might be able to further reduce the number of search results.

When using the library catalog, you can usually **limit your searches to: a specific library** (such as Thrall), **certain types of collections** (such as fiction or nonfiction), preferred **media formats** (such as DVD, VHS, Audiobooks on CD, or Web resources), and **age levels** (children, young adults, adults).

Some search engines, like **Clusty.com**, provide a “cluster” (group) of topics (located to the side of results) along with regular web page matches they have found. The U.S. Government’s website (**www.USA.gov**) does this. When you search for “Bill of Rights,” it provides topic links such as *Constitution*, *History Documents*, and *Bill of Rights Day*. Clicking on any of those links should give you fewer results and hopefully more relevant choices.

Some search engines actually have a “**search within these results**” option, allowing you to apply new keywords to a set of search results. For example, **AlltheWeb.com** includes a “search within your results” link after the results.

Search Engines within Search Engines

Some search engines actually contain more specific search engines within them. AltaVista, AlltheWeb, and Google each offer *Images*, *Videos*, and *News* searches in addition to their regular web searches. If you are looking for images, an image search will show you images, as opposed to text results in a general search.

Personal Preferences

What do you prefer? Results in a language of your choice? 10 or 20 or 50 results at a time? Filtered results (with some, but not all potentially offensive content hidden)? Some search engines, such as Google and AltaVista, have a **Preference** or **Settings** link you can click to customize which results appear and how they are displayed.

Send Your Search to More than One Search Engine

Each web search engine has strengths and weaknesses, and no two are alike. In fact, you should try more than one search service to compare your search results. You can do this easily from the Middletown Thrall Library home page (**www.thrall.org**) by clicking on our “**Search the Web**” link, typing your keywords, and selecting a search.

There are also “metasearches” that can help you compare results from multiple search engines. DogPile (**www.dogpile.com**) or MetaCrawler (**www.metacrawler.com**) are search engines that take your keywords, send them to several search engines, and produce a combined report containing matches from the other search engines.

Find the Right Tool for the Job!

Search engines can vary in many ways, such as **scope** (how much information they cover), **quality** (how old/new/authentic/well arranged/accessible is the information they contain), and **relevancy** (how close their results are to your needs). With all these varying factors, which search engine would be *best* for the information you need?

If you **come to the Reference Department at Middletown Thrall Library**, we will be happy to show you some starting paths! You can **call us at (845) 341-5461** or **ask us a question online (www.thrall.org/ask)**. You can also go to our **home page (www.thrall.org)** and **browse by topic**.

Did you know **browsing can often be better than searching**? Browsing can lead to new ideas or clue you in to terminology used to describe and categorize things that interest you. Try it! Also consider this: **the information you need might not be on the Internet**. We can help you sort it all out. **Let us be your personal search engine!**