

Information Overload

What It Is & How to Overcome It

What Is It?

TOO MUCH INFORMATION: way more than we need, can deal with, or understand at any given time!

Every day we encounter and work with information. What are the **sources** of this information? **Websites, newspapers, magazines, books, mail and e-mail, radio stations, television, people we meet, signs, electronic gadgets** (e.g. **cell phones, media players, computers**), **music, memories, dreams**, and more.

For many of us, the **Internet** can be a major (or the *greatest*) source of information overload, especially when we attempt to **locate information** on a **topic**. If we do not know *where* to find something on the Internet, we often turn to **search engines** such as **Google.com** or **Bing.com**. Without **search skills** – **knowing how to search effectively** – and **critical thinking** skills, we are likely to get **too many results** from search engines.

Can we **eliminate** information overload? Not *entirely*. Why? Information literally flows *everywhere*, around *everything* and *everyone*. We all need information at various times and for different reasons. Whenever we are *unable* to **accurately describe what we want to find** – and then **to know where we might find such information** – we can experience information overload *and* the sheer frustration that follows when we fail to use our time and energies productively.

We can begin to address this complicated situation by becoming aware of **how information works** and **how we work with certain kinds of information**.

Your Information Situation

When you **need** information, here are some **questions to consider**:

- What is your **topic**?
- Is your topic **too general**? Could your topic be **more focused and specific**?
- Can you **describe** your topic **accurately and completely**?
- **How many sources** do you need?
- **How much** of the information that you encounter do you really **need**?
- Can you **identify** and **filter-out anything unnecessary**?

Review your approaches and habits when working with information, and then consider these questions:

- Can you distinguish between **essential and relevant information** and **unnecessary and irrelevant ideas**?
- Do you find yourself **guessing or jumping around aimlessly** between ideas and tactics?
- Do you develop a unique **research strategy** or follow *similar steps* every time you research a topic?
- Are there better ways you can **organize** and **rearrange** the information you encounter?
- Could you benefit from **taking notes**, using **index cards**, or **creating an outline**?
- Have you consulted **too few or too many sources**? Did you really **consider those sources**?
- Are you aware of all the **different kinds of sources** potentially available for your topic?
- Do you **rely heavily on general search engines**? Do you often receive **too many search results**?
- Have you consulted **subject-specific reference works** and **specialized search engines**?
- Do you know **how to use a computer, e-mail, and word processing software** to **type, store, transfer, and retrieve information** whenever necessary? Are you **computer literate**?
- When **overwhelmed** by information you encountered, can you **request clarification or assistance**?

Try to think things through *before* typing or jumping online prematurely. Whenever possible, try to **use technology and all available information resources to your advantage!** Many technologies first created with the intention of “making our lives easier” (such as the **Internet, search engines, portable media players, and cell phones**) often become major contributors to information overload.

Try to keep your options open, and try *not* to rely on only one source or search technique. Try to **diversify** and **improve** your use of tools and services (such as **article databases, library catalogs, encyclopedias, specialized reference works**) so you can spend *less* time searching and more time understanding and developing ideas. **Consider multiple and alternative sources**. Sometimes you must **expand or alter your search** to include *other* topics. When in doubt, **ask a librarian** for help!

(continued on back page)

Information Overload: Other Tactics & Considerations...

- ✓ When communicating online, **never share your e-mail address with just anyone or any website** because you might be **overwhelmed with messages, advertisements, and all sorts of junk mail!**
- ✓ If you *do* receive excessive e-mail, especially from unknown / unsolicited sources, try to learn how to **block or filter unwanted messages** through your **Internet or e-mail service provider**.
- ✓ While online, try to **observe and carefully consider websites you visit**, especially those requiring **registration**. Whenever possible, try to **protect your privacy**. How? By **not sharing** things such as **e-mail or mailing addresses, telephone numbers, social security numbers, credit card numbers, or other unnecessary personal details** – especially on “**social networking**” websites.
- ✓ **Education** can help you improve your **reading and memory skills**, enabling you to **handle more information intelligently, creatively, and efficiently**. In addition to **local area workshops and classes**, consider taking one or more **free online courses** offered by various universities as part of their “**OpenCourseWare**” efforts (learn more about that by going to www.thrall.org/college and clicking on **OpenCourseWare**).

Members of Middletown Thrall Library are entitled to access **free educational services** such as **Universal Class** or **Tell Me More**. Please inquire at our **Reference Department** or go to www.thrall.org/databases (and click **Online Courses**) for more information.

- ✓ **Critical thinking** – the ability to **actively evaluate and intelligently apply information** –empowers you to make the best of any information situation. To think critically is to **question** any information you encounter, along with its authors, thoroughly and objectively. Always **consider the sources!** Visit our Reference Department or go to www.thrall.org/docs for free tips and guides!
- ✓ Try to **limit distractions to keep your mind attentive, focused, and refreshed**. This goes for “real life” *and* online activities. Instead of **dividing your attentions** by trying to “**multitask**” so much, try **setting separate times aside** for activities such as research, social networking, checking messages, reading, and so on.
- ✓ Consider the **quality of information sources** you incorporate both in your research *and* your life. Ask yourself if there are **better sources elsewhere** – “better” meaning, among other things, “**more authoritative and current,**” “**less biased and more balanced,**” and “**more orderly and complete.**”
- ✓ Remember: **quality is almost always better than quantity** when it comes to information! Getting “a million results” (or more) in an article database or search engine is a **major warning sign** that your topic (as *you* have described it) is still **too general** and would benefit from greater **specificity**.
- ✓ **The Internet can be a very powerful research tool**, but only if you use it *properly*. Why waste hours and days **randomly searching** when you could jump to “the good stuff” within minutes? You can use our in-depth **Internet resource guides** (at www.thrall.org/guides) to do just that!

Also, please visit our **Reference Department** or go to www.thrall.org/docs for free tips and guides on how to use library resources, search engines, and other information services and online resources more effectively!

Titles of free publications we provide to the public include: **Critical Thinking Skills, Facts or Feelings, Search Engine Basics, Search Smarter & Better, Advanced Searches, Diversify Your Search, Web Checklist, Why Search?**, and **Research Problems to Avoid**.

- ✓ Make use of the **many free information tools available at your library!** Libraries subscribe to **article databases, encyclopedias, and many other research services**. Many of these tools are available on **home computers** if you have an Internet connection and a Thrall library card. Please visit our **Reference Department** or go to www.thrall.org to learn more about what you can use.
- ✓ Librarians are among your closest **allies against information overload** – especially since we always face a **constant rush of new information**, including books, CDs, DVDs, websites, audiobooks, magazines, newspapers, government documents, and so much more.

Every week, **library collections expand**, and **librarians work to improve public access** to information in *all* forms. Librarians often use **classification systems**, such as the **Dewey Decimal System**, to arrange items so all of us can find things *quickly and reliably*.

Librarians can show you **shortcuts to better information sources** as well as **research tools and services you never knew existed**. Rather than presenting to you *thousands* – or *millions* – of random and uninformative search results, librarians prefer suggesting *one to several* excellent resources actually worth your time and attention!