

Search Smarter, Better

Whether you're in the library catalog, using one of our article databases, or searching the web, the search terms you use can make all the difference in the quantity and quality of information you encounter.

There are so many ways to search. Some methods will produce better results than others. Here are some suggestions to help you on your way:

- **Spelling is extremely important!** Without the proper spelling, you may find little or no matches for your topic. Some search engines may suggest alternate spellings. While such suggestions might be helpful, do not trust them completely, since those suggestions are only based on the text you entered.
- **Be as specific as possible.** Describe exactly what you are looking for and eliminate any general terms from your inquiry. If by starting out so specifically you fail to find any matches, you might then use more general search terms to bring up more results.
- **Try to learn the proper terminology.** Each field of knowledge, such as math, science, or literature, has its own special terms. Specialized glossaries and dictionaries do exist, and some can be found in the 400s section of the collection. Taking time to familiarize yourself with terms and how they are used can enable you to search more effectively, make more sense of what you are reading, and determine which sources are best. Librarians can help you locate these kinds of reference works and use them to research your topic with greater accuracy.
- **Consider using a dictionary.** Dictionaries help you spell words correctly and give you a better sense of how a word can take on different meanings in different situations. Many dictionaries also contain the history of a word (etymologies) and show you how words are spelled when singular or plural. The library offers many different kinds of dictionaries, both in print and online, so take advantage of them!
- **Consider using a thesaurus.** A thesaurus helps you discover similar words and ideas (synonyms) as well as *opposite* concepts (antonyms). Sometimes the search terms you are using *are* good yet they fail to bring up relevant results. Consider using a thesaurus to look up words you know to discover potentially *better* words. Better search terms should lead to improved search results!
- **Learn and build upon *controlled vocabularies*.** Information is stored, indexed, and retrieved in many different ways. "Controlled vocabularies" are standardized terms used to describe subjects. When you find something that brings you closer to your search, examine the descriptions and subject keywords being used and see if you can take some of those and add them to your search or use them instead of your current search terms to produce better search results. Be on the lookout for "see also" cross-references that can help reveal related topics.
- **Use the table of contents, indexes, site maps, appendices, bibliographies.** Many books and e-books have a *table of contents* (at the beginning of a text) or an *index* (at the end of a text). Some websites have something called a *site map*. These are all things you can use to get an idea of what is in a book, an e-book, or a website, as well as an opportunity to jump quickly to the specific information you need. Sometimes a book can contain one *appendix* or more (*appendices*). An appendix usually contains additional information that relates in some way to the main book. A *bibliography* contains a list of sources an author used when researching the information you are reading. Bibliographies can help you discover more information and possibly help you work more closely with some of the actual sources of ideas explored in a text.

(continued on back page)

Search Engine Strategies

Here are even more tips to help you get better results during your searches, especially when you are working with electronic sources:

- **Learn how each search engine works.** The library catalog is much different from databases or your favorite search engine. Each search engine has its own strengths and disadvantages. Explore the different search methods and related options that each search engine offers. Look for an “Advanced Search” link or button and try to see if that enables you to search more specifically.
- **Learn about limits.** Limits can help you intelligently reduce the number of search results you are shown so you can see more relevant results. Many search engines, like the library catalog or most of our article databases, allow you to limit your search in different ways. For example, in the library catalog, you can use the Limit menu that appears on the search results page to limit by location, such as your local library. Sometimes you can limit searches to a range of dates or to a certain type of media, such as large print books, audio books, or DVDs.
- **Try to sort it out.** *Sorting means rearranging things.* Sometimes you can sort a list of search results alphabetically or by date. Sorting can be very useful. For example, if you are looking for the latest articles about a particular subject in an article database, you can click the “Sort by Date” link to rearrange results so the latest articles appear first. Sorting is also available in the library catalog.
- **Learn about advanced search operators.** Some search engines support advanced search commands and search term connectors. In some cases you might be able to say you want information about one thing, or something else, and yet specify what you do *not* want. Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) can be used to group ideas and to tell the computer exactly what you want, as in (CAT OR DOG) AND PET. Click the “Help” link in the search engine you are using to learn if it supports Boolean operations or any other special search commands.
- **Can you express your search as a phrase?** If you are looking for a specific set of words that occur in a specific order, such as the “Library of Congress,” then you might want to type the search with quotation marks around it. When most Internet search engines see this, they might attempt to find the words in web pages according to the order you specified. You can often include regular terms along with phrases, as in this sample search: *photographs “Civil War” “Library of Congress”*

Remember, help is *always available!*

When you finally find information, your work is far from over: you still must *critically analyze* the material, becoming aware of its many different properties, such as who created or provided the information, when it was published, how complete or unbiased the information might be, and so on.

Whether you’re in the library, at home, or at work on your computer, our librarians are eager to assist you. We know finding and working with information can often be very difficult and frustrating. We know many of you like to try finding things on your own, and many times you can be successful. But there are still many things we would like to tell you about, such as sources you might not know of, new services we either created for you or subscribed to on your behalf, special collections, and much more.

We’re also very concerned for you, because you might not know about the risks of disinformation, deceptive websites, erroneous or outdated sources, paid search results, identity theft, or the many other problems that can negatively affect information or your own personal well being. Please be careful!

We encourage you to come to the library and maximize your search potential. Allow us to connect you with some of the finest sources available, be they in print, on the web, or in some other form. There is a *lot* of information out there – *too much* in many cases – but we can show you some time and life-saving shortcuts! There’s always an easier and better way to search right here at your library!

So, whenever you have any questions, please feel free to come to the Reference Department or to ask us questions over the web at www.thrall.org/ask