How to find what you want on the internet

With the advancement of the internet and the ever-broadening array of knowledge that can be found online, search technology needed to keep pace with the increasing demands placed on it. What began as a simple mechanism for finding information – similar to the ones used for many years in conjunction with computer databases – had to rapidly evolve into a sophisticated tool covering all corners of the World Wide Web.

Nowadays, search engines are big business, with companies recognising that, in order to succeed, their sites must be as high up the search engine register as possible. Search engine companies also police these lists, fighting a constant battle against malicious virus-riddled or empty sites looking to entice, trap or use unsuspecting web users.

How do search engines work?

Search engines work by matching inputted words with pages on the internet. If you type horse racing Sandown into a search engine, the engine will use its artificial intelligence to bring you pages which match horse racing in Sandown. It may also analyse the words that you typed in and deliver you similar pages, related to the interests that it presumes you have. So search engines can be presumptuous little things, but they are incredibly useful. Without them, a great many web pages that have been neglected by their owners would be cut adrift and simply lost in the cold, dark outer-reaches of cyberspace.

Search engines like Google, Yahoo, Ask Jeeves and Bing have become household names, with the former even becoming an often used verb. The refrain “just Google it” is now in everyday usage all over the world.

Choosing the right keywords

The first step to using a search engine effectively is to identify your keywords. Keywords are always based on specific nouns or verbs, for example bicycle or skiing. Don't clutter up your search with vague words such as and, if, or, to etc, as these will confuse the search engine and it will therefore take longer to achieve its results. Often, the search engine will discount words like these, and any repeated words, altogether.

Remember not to be too vague with your keywords. General keywords have become overused and are almost useless; instead, refine your keywords to lead you directly to what you want. For example, searching for vans or van will lead you to lists of pages interspersed with information on skateboarding companies and Dutch footballers, while a search for light commercial vehicle will deliver no such confusion.
Filter your results

You can refine your search further if you know exactly what type of results you are looking for. Most search engines will feature a refinement tool that allows you to look for images, video or other content relating to your search.

Streamline your search

Google has further tricks up its sleeve to help you get the information that you require.

Google has become so smart that sometimes you needn't even leave the Google site to find what you're after. Using keywords such as population or unemployment along with the name of the nation in question will bring up a public data graph, giving you detailed, up to the minute information relevant to your search. Such items can be incredibly useful for casual research or for professional projects. Searches on the time, weather, stock prices or sports results are often served up directly by the search engines themselves.
On a more basic level, type a sum into Google and watch as Google's calculator answers it for you. Type £100 in NOK into the search bar and Google will calculate the conversion into Norwegian Kronor. The applications of Google's expertise are endless.

Using operators for more accurate results

Using certain symbols in your searches removes any ambiguity, giving you a more accurate search. Quotation marks are the simplest method of doing this so we'll start with them.

Exact match quotation marks

If you type a phrase such as: *I began with my overshadowed childhood, and passed through those timid days to the heavy time when my aunt lay dead* into a search engine, the engine will search for each word individually and bring up results such as “medicine personal statements” on studential.com, which may well contain all of the above words but none of the relevant information that you were looking for.

Adding a quotation mark at the beginning and end of the phrase tells the search engine that it is searching for an entire phrase rather than casting its net wide in search of individual words. This will streamline your results and give you only the answers that you require. You will learn that the phrase is a quote from the 458th page of ‘Bleak House’ by Charles Dickens, but you may also find other information of interest; for example, instances of people quoting the phrase on Twitter, or blogging about it. Streamlining your search in this way will prove very useful in elucidating information that at first glance may appear unclear.

Boolean operators

Boolean operators (the most useful being OR and NOT/-) have more complex functions but can be immensely useful if you know exactly what you are looking for. These devices allow search engines to make judgements based upon what you require, rather than simply finding the words that you have typed.

For example, if you are searching for guinea pig related information and not rabbit related information, you will probably be aware that your search will be clouded by sites offering information regarding the latter. In the advanced search option on your search engine, type *guinea pigs -rabbits* and click search (be sure to put the minus sign directly before the word that you wish to exclude). This will refine your search and remove any mention of rabbits from your found pages.
If you're not quite sure which niche the information you're looking for falls under, you can use the OR operator. Type in *jazz OR blues* and the search engines will bring back pages for either term. Remember, the OR operator always broadens a search.

Hopefully these tips have been of some use to you and you are ready to employ them on your next web-search. Happy browsing!

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