

INFORMATION SERVICES

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This guide was adapted from [The Seven Commandments of Effective Web Searching](#), originally written by Cindy Carlson and published on [LLRX.Com](#). Please send comments to library@wmrc.uiuc.edu.

Introduction

As search engine technology and usability improves, people have become more and more comfortable doing their own searching. Although most people can find what they need eventually, the strategies outlined below will help improve the techniques of even the most experienced searchers.

Use Your Time Wisely

This rule applies to both web and print sources. Time is money, whether you bill for it or not. Web use may be free, but if you spend 45 minutes searching fruitlessly through irrelevant information, you're wasting time that you could be spending on other things. What you need may not be available or may be located somewhere you haven't heard about.

Instead of looking until you're frustrated, search for ten minutes, then ask for help from a librarian. Librarians are familiar with a wide range of print and electronic resources. They can give you ideas about where to start searching and what approach to use. They will also show you where to find the information. If your organization doesn't have a librarian, don't forget there may be one you can call.

If you're looking for environmental information and are located in the Great Lakes Region, you can use the [Great Lakes Regional Pollution Prevention Roundtable's \(GLRPPR\) Help Desk Librarian](#) service. The librarians at the [Illinois Waste Management and Research Center \(WMRC\)](#) provide this service for GLRPPR. Your local public, university, or community college library may also be able to help you locate what you need. Many libraries now offer virtual reference services via the web. For example, [MyLibrarian](#) is a collaborative service of over twenty libraries located in East Central Illinois.

Don't Believe Everything You Read

Both print and electronic materials purchased for a library typically go through a thorough review process. The staff at the WMRC Library checks to see if materials are from a reputable publisher. We evaluate the publications we want to buy to determine if they are current, useful and well organized. Web resources added to the library's catalog undergo the same scrutiny. GLRPPR's [Topic Hubs and Sector Resources](#) also go through a review process outlined in the organization's quality assurance documentation.

On the Internet, you don't have that guarantee. Anyone can publish a web page and a great deal of the information out there hasn't been evaluated. The page of complex chemical formulas you are looking at could have been posted by a respected scientist or a failing graduate student. It's often difficult to tell what information is reliable and what isn't.

Another assumption many people make is that only the most current information is on the Internet. While this is sometimes true, it isn't always. For instance, the [Code of Federal Regulations](#) on the Internet is updated when the print version is updated. To make sure you aren't missing something, you still need to search the [Federal Register](#).

If you are ever tempted to rely on information from the Internet without evaluating it or verifying it against a reputable print resource, imagine passing it along to another colleague (or your boss) who comes back later and tells you that it was incorrect. **Always** check to see how current a page is. **Always** look for contact information for the page author. If there is no one you can contact with a complaint or a question, you may have a problem. For more on evaluating Web resources, see the [bibliography](#) at the end of the guide.

Use The Appropriate Tool

Search tools on the web are divided into two categories: search engines and web directories. Search engines use a program called a spider to comb the web to search for and index new sites, which are then compiled in a searchable database. People index web directories. Although they may use spiders to compile lists of sites, there is generally a human evaluating and categorizing the material as well.

Use a search engine when you are looking for something very specific (the name of an association, a company, or a person or thing with an unusual name) or for an unusual single term or exact phrase. If you are searching for complex concepts, be sure to take advantage of the advanced search options available at whatever search engine you're using. [Google](#) and [AllTheWeb](#) are both excellent search engines.

Use a directory when what you are looking for isn't a unique or specific item, when you want to know what kinds of materials are available on a particular topic, or when you know there will be a huge amount of information on your topic and you want a pre-selected list of good quality pages. Rather than sorting through the huge number of mostly irrelevant results returned by a search engine, you can let the editors of the directory site do the work for you. Two well-known examples of directories are [Yahoo](#) and [Open Directory](#).

There are other useful tools that can help you find information that may not be available through a search engine or a directory. One is the [World Wide Web Virtual Library](#), which is run by a loose confederation of volunteers who compile lists of links for particular areas in which they are expert. Another is the [Invisible Web Directory](#), which indexes resources not always included by standard search engines. For more information on search engines and directories, see the [bibliography](#) at the end of the guide.

Read The Directions

Nearly everyone can benefit by it, but almost nobody does it. The only way to really understand the results of a search and to efficiently find what you're looking for is to know how the tools work.

If you want to know how resources are selected for a search engine or directory, try to find its criteria for site submissions (e.g., <http://yahoo.com/info/suggest/>). Most search tools also list an advanced search (e.g., http://www.google.com/advanced_search or <http://www.alltheweb.com/advanced>) and some also have a help (e.g., <http://www.alltheweb.com/help/>) or general information page (e.g., <http://www.google.com/about.html>). The more you know about how your favorite tool works, the better you will be able to take advantage of its capabilities.

Be Flexible When You Search

Learn and use more than one search tool. If you are not finding what you want using your favorite, try another. If you use the same tool all the time, you're missing something.

If your search finds more or less than you expect, consider a different strategy. If you are using a search engine, maybe a directory would be a better alternative. Flexibility with terminology is equally important. Try variations on your terms (e.g. "clean technology" as well as "pollution prevention") when possible.

Keep Up With the Latest Developments

Search engines constantly add features (for example, check out the [Google Toolbar](#)). For the latest comparisons and evaluations of search engines, monitor the following sites:

[Search Engine Showdown](#) not only provides the statistics you need to compare search tools, but also includes tips, news and several charts which compare popular search engines. The [Search Engine Features Chart](#) is particularly helpful when you need help recalling whether the engine you're using allows you to use AND, OR, and NOT to combine search terms or automatically searches for plurals.

[Search Engine Watch](#) discusses search tools from the searcher's point of view as well as from the perspective of those who submit sites to be indexed. You can also register to receive daily and monthly newsletters covering the latest in web searching. The fine folks at Search Engine Watch also publish a free daily e-mail newsletter called [SearchDay](#). Each issue features web search news, reviews, tools, tips, and search engine headlines from across the web.

For more information on staying current with the latest technologies, see the [Keeping Up With Current Information Technologies](#) Reference Guide.

It Isn't Always on the Internet

Even expert searchers fall into the habit of using the Internet exclusively when trying to find answers to their research questions. It's so easy! It's right there on your desktop! You almost always find something. Remember that the Internet is one of many tools you can use to find the information you need. Your library often provides information in more depth and may have resources which are easier, faster, and more reputable. Sometimes the Internet gets you part of the way, but ultimately a phone call is a better option. Remember that electronic searching, especially Internet searching, is not always the best way to find what you seek. Take advantage of all the tools at your disposal.

Other Helpful Resources

Evaluating Information Sources

Block, Marylane (2002). "Gullibles Travels". *Library Journal*, April 15, 2002. Available: <http://libraryjournal.reviewsnews.com/index.asp?layout=article&articleid=CA210719> [accessed June 24, 2002].

Cooke, Alison (1999). *Neal-Schuman Authoritative Guide to Evaluating Information on the Internet*. New York: Neal-Schuman.

Ormondroyd, Joan, Michael Engle, and Tony Cosgrove (2001). "Critically Analyzing Information Sources". *Cornell University OKU Libraries Reference Services Division*. Available: <http://www.library.cornell.edu/okuref/research/skill26.htm> [accessed June 24, 2002].

Tyburski, Genie (2001). "Evaluative Skills", *Teaching Internet Research Skills*, <http://www.virtualchase.com/researchskills/quality.html> [accessed June 24, 2002].

Search Engines and Directories

Abelock, Debbi (1997). *Choose the Best Search Engine for Your Information Needs*. <http://www.lincoln-academy.pvt.k12.me.us/libraryweb/Links/adviceengine.html> [accessed June 24, 2002].

Calishain, Tara (2002). *ResearchBuzz*, <http://www.researchbuzz.com/> [accessed June 24, 2002].

Sherman, Chris (2001). "Search Engine or Directory?". *Search Day*, Number 6 (May 14, 2001), <http://searchenginewatch.com/searchday/01/sd0514-sedir.html> [accessed June 24, 2002].

Sherman, Chris and Gary Price (2001). *The Invisible Web: Uncovering Information Sources the Search Engines Can't See*. Medford, NJ : Information Today. [The Invisible Web Directory is online at <http://www.invisible-web.net/>].

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