

Because the Internet is so huge, you will have much better success finding information on a specific topic by following a few basic tips and learning a few search techniques.

But the next step is even more important: evaluating whether the information you find is reliable and useful.

FINDING INFORMATION

It's important to understand the differences between the "public" part of the Internet—the World Wide Web—and the "private part (also called the "invisible web")—the databases that the ACC library subscribes to. These databases have information that has gone through a publication process that assures more consistent levels of reliability than the World Wide Web, where there is no quality control.

These databases are usually the best places to start. They are available from the ACC library homepage: library.austincc.edu. On the ACC library homepage, click on **Articles & Research**, then **Articles and More** from the dropdown menu. Some of these databases are "reference" sources (encyclopedias, dictionaries, biographies), some are "indexes" to magazine and newspaper articles, and some are a mix of both.

For the public World Wide Web, it's often smart to begin by using a web directory if you have a general topic, such as "Child Development" or "Journalism." These directories list quality web sources that have been reviewed by a real person, not just generated by a computer algorithm. Try the directory called "Subject Guides to Research Information" (library.austincc.edu/help/shortcutsWapi.php) or the Internet Public Library (www.ipl.org).

But when you have specific questions, you'll need to use a web search engine. None of them can do all the techniques listed below. We recommend you pick one of the following search engines and learn it in some detail:

Google (www.google.com)

Yahoo! (search.yahoo.com)

Bing (www.bing.com)

Search Techniques—For search engines on both the databases and the Web

Keywords

Pick the most basic words that define your topic. In general, don't type normal sentences in search engines; just use the keywords.

Example: For the question "Who were the members of George Washington's cabinet?" the keywords would be George Washington **AND** cabinet **AND** members.

Boolean Operators

Combine keywords using **AND**, **OR**, **NOT**:

AND gets more specific results because all the words must be on a web page.

Some search engines automatically insert **AND** between words, but it doesn't hurt for you to put it there.

OR allows you to search for synonyms or word variations in one search. Often there are other words that mean the same as your keyword. **OR** searches for these variations at the same time.

Eliminate unwanted words by using **NOT** (or a minus sign). This prevents useless sites from showing up in your search results.

Example: *Texas AND environment* will get only results that mention both the words.

Example: *environment OR ecology* gets results containing either the word environment or the word ecology.

Example: For information on the planet Saturn, you get better results by searching for *Saturn NOT automobile*.

Phrase Searches

Often keywords are more than one word. Most search engines let you put quotation marks around these so only results with the exact phrase are listed.

Example: *"rap music"*

Truncation

If you shorten a keyword to its basic root and insert a special character (usually an asterisk * or a question mark) at the end, some search engines will locate variations on the word.

Example: Searching for *politic** will find: *POLITICS*, *POLITICAL*, *POLITICIAN*. Note: Check the search engine help screens to see if this can be done. It's most common on the subscription databases.

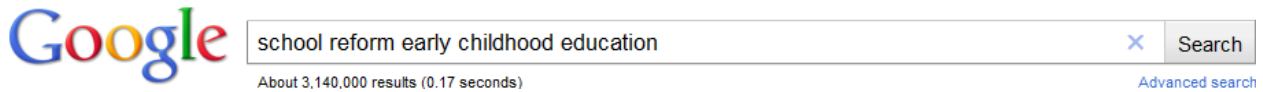
Parentheses

Combine the techniques discussed by using parentheses. The search engine will search for what's grouped or nested inside the parentheses first.

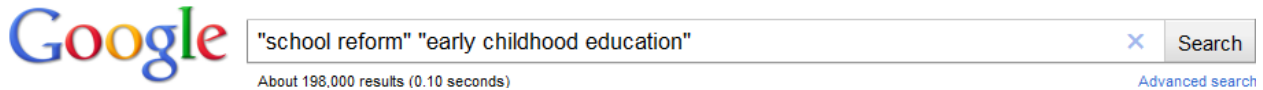
Example:
(*"rap music" OR "hip hop"*) AND *cancel**

Search Techniques in Action

The keywords *school reform early childhood education* (without quotation marks) yield over 3.1 million results:



"*school reform*" "*early childhood education*" (the AND search is Google's default) reduces the results to 198,000:



EVALUATION OF INFORMATION

Be skeptical when evaluating any information source. This is especially true for World Wide Web pages, because there is no quality control. Anyone can put information on the Web.

Consider these factors when evaluating a source:

Credibility

Who is the author? Are any credentials given? Who is the publisher? If you can't tell or if there isn't any clear information, be suspicious. For web sites, you often have to check the home page or the "About Us" page to find who is behind a source.

Point of View or Bias

There's nothing wrong with a source having a point of view, but you need to be aware of it so you can investigate the other sides. Example: Information on gun control from the National Rifle Association.

Timeliness

Think about your topic and how important recent information is to it. For an art history project, it probably isn't very important. For a paper on genetic engineering, it is very important.

Accuracy

This is the ultimate point. But you may not know enough about a topic to judge. Look for solid evidence, such as research studies and statistics. Is there a bibliography or references to other sources the author used? These indicate the information is based on research rather than just opinion.

USE THE LIBRARIANS

Librarians specialize in helping people find and evaluate information. They are glad to help. You can visit in person, call on the phone, or send email questions.

For locations, hours, and contact information, visit the ACC Library home page: library.austincc.edu