

# Student Success Guides: Searching the Internet

## SAINT JOSEPH'S ONLINE



### Search Logic

Search logic refers to the way in which you, and the search engine you're using, combine your search terms. For example, the search Pecan Pie Recipes could be interpreted as a search for any of the three search terms (sites about pecans, sites about pies, or sites about recipes), all of the search terms (sites about pecans, sites about pies, and sites about recipes), or the exact phrase (just sites about pecan pie recipes). As you can see, depending on the logic applied, the results of each of the three searches could be quite different.

All search engines have some default method of combining terms, but these sites don't always make it easy for you to know which methods of search logic are being used. Reading their online Help and experimenting with different combinations of words can help. Many search engines let the searcher modify the default search logic by using pull-down menus or special operators, such as the plus sign (+) to require that a search term be present (e.g., Titanic +blueprints), and the minus sign (-) to exclude a term from a search (e.g., Titanic -movies).

Search logic is modified through the use of what are called Boolean operators, which are logical operations used to combine search terms in many databases. The basic Boolean operators are represented by the words AND, OR and NOT. Whether or not a search engine supports Boolean logic, and the way in which it implements it, is another important consideration when selecting a search tool.

Use OR when either of the search terms would do. For example, enter Shelley OR Keats if you want to research works that were written by either Shelley or Keats. Typing Shelly AND Keats, however, would only return Web sites that mention both Shelley and Keats. If you are specifically researching Shelley and do not want anything regarding Keats, typing Shelley NOT Keats in the search textbox will accomplish the desired result.

Operators can be used more than once. If, for example, you wanted to research presidential assassinations other than Lincoln's and Kennedy's, you could enter: Presidential Assassinations NOT Lincoln NOT Kennedy, or Presidential Assassinations -Lincoln -Kennedy

### Effective Internet Searches

Whichever Internet search resource you are using, it is important to have an effective search strategy. This primarily involves the following:

1. Determine keywords and search terms that effectively describe the subject area(s) you are researching. Consider the following tips for finding effective keywords:

a. Be Specific - Try to enter more than one related word, or a phrase, rather than a single, general word. If you're researching organic gardening, for example, do not just enter gardening. If salmon, don't just type fish. Entering education is not as specific as nursing education or k-12 teacher education.

b. Use Synonyms to hone your search. For example, instead of just searching colleges, also try schools, universities, etc.

c. Spelling Counts! Your searches will work best when your spelling is accurate. Searching for information on Sheryl Crow will not go as well if you misspell her name as Cheryl or Crowe.

2. Use appropriate Internet search resources, such as those listed above, by entering these keywords or phrases in conjunction with search logic.

3. As you continue to learn from your research results, hone your search, determining variations on and synonyms of your keywords and terms.

Want to find out more about search engines and how they differ? A detailed comparison of popular internet search tools can be found at <http://www.infopeople.org/search/chart.html>.

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## Internet search tips and tricks

- Whenever possible, enclose search terms in quotation marks, such as "To be or not to be." Without the quotes, search results will address each of the individual words, but with the quotes, many relevant sites relating to Shakespeare and Hamlet are invoked.
- Search engines use an algorithm to rank retrieved documents in order of decreasing relevance. Therefore, it's often unnecessary to browse through more than the first few pages of results, even when the total number of results is in the thousands.
- Be skeptical about how credible any Internet source is. Anyone with a little technical skill can publish on the Internet. Some authors are amateurs and some are experts; some sites are updated daily and others have been outdated for several years. Ensure that the information you obtain and use is credible. Consider its source whenever possible.
- Some search engines allow the use of wildcard characters (\* and ?) in search statements. The question mark (?) represents one character. For example, ? could be used for retrieving different spellings (such as colo?r for color or colour). The asterisk (\*) represents any number of characters, so it's useful for words with a common root (e.g., psycholog\* for psychology, psychological, psychologist, etc.). Wildcard characters vary among search engines. Some permit only right truncation, while others also support middle truncation. Experimentation with each search engine or directory is encouraged.

## A Quick Guide to Evaluating Information on the Web

1. What do you know about the author of the information?
  - Who created the site? Web sites interested in presenting accurate information will clearly state the origin of their content.
  - What are their credentials? Are they qualified to write on the subject?
  - What is their motive for presenting their information?
  - Is it politically or commercially motivated, or is its goal to disseminate information with the intent of being unbiased? Sites from professional organizations or government web sites can usually be trusted to have accurate and well-researched information. Other sites may have useful information as well, but you need to be very careful to determine their accuracy.
2. How would you evaluate the quality of the content?
  - Does the information appear to be well researched? Does it refer to the work of other scholars and professionals in the field to support its arguments?
  - Is the Web site geared toward other professionals in the field or to the average reader?
  - Is the writing professional and grammatically correct, or is it sloppy, with spelling and grammatical errors?
3. How relevant is the content to your course?
  - How does the information in the site expand, clarify or respond to the information presented in the course materials?
  - Would you recommend such a site to other members of the course?

Check out more tips in the GPS Student Orientation

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