

12 tips to search the Internet successfully

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TRYING TO NAVIGATE the World Wide Web without help is like trying to do research in a library that has no librarians, a jumble of card catalogs listing just a fraction of the collection — and 320 million books.

To flounder less and learn more in your maiden voyages on the Web, follow these tips.

1 If your subject is broad (cancer, archaeology, politics), start with a directory — such as Yahoo! (<http://www.yahoo.com>) — that categorizes Web sites by subject. Just pick the most likely subject, then drill down through layers of subcategories until you find what you want.

2 If your subject is narrow (such as a particular bed-and-breakfast you want to try), choose a search engine: AltaVista (<http://altavista.digital.com>), HotBot (<http://www.hotbot.com>), Excite (<http://www.excite.com>), Infoseek (<http://www.infoseek.com>) or Northern Light (<http://www.nlsearch.com>).

3 For comprehensive research, use several search engines or try a meta-search engine such as Meta-Crawler (<http://www.metacrawler.com>) that simultaneously queries numerous engines.

FOUR Before using a search engine, read any instructions it offers. Yes, these documents can be snoozers. But each engine has its quirks, and knowing them will help you craft a more accurate search.

5 When choosing keywords for a search engine, select six to eight words to help narrow your search. If you type just one or two words, you'll likely get thousands or even millions of documents. Use nouns whenever possible, and put the most important words first. Put a "+" before any word you want to include, and a "-" before any word you want to exclude (this works with most engines).

SIX To increase your search's accuracy, use phrases instead of single words. Put quotation marks around the phrase.

SEVEN Many search engines will let you refine the results of your initial query. Do it.

8 When you find a good Web site about your topic, check whether it provides links to similar sites.

9 You may be able to guess the address of specific sites. Many are "www," a period, the name or acronym of the site's operator, a period and three letters denoting the site's type. Thus: www.microsoft.com (commercial), www.fbi.gov (federal government) and www.harvard.edu (education).

10 Double-check your spelling. You'd be amazed at how many people misspell words in their queries.

ELEVEN Keep in mind that even if you type a precise query many of the documents returned won't be applicable. Computers (and search engines) aren't perfect.

12 Remember: The Internet does not contain the sum of all knowledge. You may still need to hit the library.

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