

World Wide Web Fallacies

1. "Everything" is FREE on the web—A lot of information is available for free on the web but not "everything."
 - Most journal articles are not available online for free.
 - Many sites on the web specialize in taking your money in exchange for information provided.
 - Many copyright holders are not eager to give away intellectual property.
 - Many items are available on the web but not accessible with general search engines.

2. Web sites are as reliable as books and articles—Anyone can create a web site with a computer and a little skill. No one controls what information is included on that site or how the information is presented.
 - No mandatory editing.
 - No mandatory fact checking.
 - No guarantees!
 - In contrast to that, many journal articles go through a rigorous evaluation and fact-checking process before they are published.

3. The web is a big library—The web is not "organized for use" as is a library.
 - Unlike library materials, web sites are not "selected" by professionals.
 - Web sites can disappear instantly, leaving no trace.

4. The best web search is the one with the most results—Most web searches retrieve thousands (or millions) of results, many of which are totally irrelevant to your needs.
 - Retrieving a very large number of results causes you to have to sift through a lot of information to find the most relevant sites. Selecting results takes time!
 - Web search engines are user-friendly and very basic search machines. They do not function as well as journal databases for complex searches, such as those often needed for focused scholarly research.

However, the web is a good research tool for many information needs. It is especially important to learn its limitations as well as how to focus a search.

- Be critical of the information you get on the web. Since no one else is evaluating the web site for you, do the job yourself.
- Learn how to use the tools available (search engines) to retrieve relevant results. There are several ways to fine-tune a web search in order to limit the number of irrelevant results. Become familiar with those ways by looking at the tips on the next page.

SEARCH ENGINE TIPS

Here are a few suggestions about how to do effective searches when doing research on the web:

1. **Select the most uncommon words:**

When searching a database that may contain 500 million records at the least and over 4 billion at the most, it is important to select terms which are unique to your topic area, e.g. search for the word "retailing" instead of the broad area of "industries". Often you can combine non-unique words together in the same search to narrow your results.

2. **Enter most important terms first:**

Some search engines search in the order in which terms are entered to help determine rankings.

3. **Capitals may count:**

Using capital letters in proper noun searches will help narrow your search in some engines. Be sure to check if the engine you are using supports this feature.

4. **Consider synonyms:**

There may be dozens of words which express your topic. Make sure you search all synonyms, spelling variations, abbreviations, etc.

5. **Use quotes for searching phrases:**

Placing quotation marks [" "] around phrases will improve search results by leaving out those words which may appear on a page but not next to each other.

6. **Use parentheses in complex searches:**

Parentheses determine the manner and order in which [Boolean operators](#) (AND, OR, etc.) are processed. For example, compare the following searches:

products or services and Microsoft
(products or services) and Microsoft

Since the first search does not specify processing, your results could include all items containing the word products and items containing only the words services and Microsoft.

7. **Be familiar with how your search options work:**

This means knowing the basics of keyword searching and how to use search operators effectively.

8. **Read the instructions:**

Remember that there are dozens of search engines available and each operates differently. Reading the search engine's instructions will help you figure out the default search operator used and other search options available. Also, determine if wildcard or truncation symbols are available for broadening your search.

9. **Use more than one search engine:**

Since no one search engine is comprehensive, you should try your search in several.

10. **Examine and evaluate your results:**

Since there is no formal quality control for the entire WWW, make sure the sources you find are accurate and authoritative. Here are several tips that you can follow and questions you can ask to establish quality:

- Identify who created the web site and wrote or compiled the materials on it. What are their credentials?
- If the information you want is subject to regular revision, check the date to see how recent the web page was created or revised.
- Have the documents retrieved been "edited"? If so, for what purpose and by whom? You can often get to the source by shortening the URL. Is the source a library/archives, a commercial source, or someone's blog page? Who is the intended audience and how might this have shaped the page content?
- What kind of credibility does the web page have on the web itself? Many search engines allow you to do a "link" search to determine what pages link to a particular web page.