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The Prentice Hall Guide to

Evaluating Online Resources

with Research Navigator

History 2004

Melissa Payton

THE PRENTICE HALL GUIDE TO

EVALUATING ONLINE RESOURCES WITH RESEARCH NAVIGATOR

HISTORY 2004

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Chapter 1

An Overview of Sources

What Are Sources?

When instructors speak of sources, they're usually referring to "outside" sources--materials outside your own knowledge or thinking that contain someone else's ideas. Sources provide information; they let you learn something you did not know before. Examples of legitimate sources include credible information from the Internet, library collections, and the spoken words of experts. They can be in the form of books, newspaper articles, interviews, television and radio programs, websites, maps, online databases, magazines, computer and video images, audiotapes, and academic journals. Sources add authority to what you write and nearly all college research assignments require their use.

Using sources well is the hallmark of sound nonfiction writing. Most research writing involves a combination of print and online sources. Although this guide will focus on online resources, the advice on evaluating sources--determining whether a website offers credible information that meets the standards of academic research--almost always applies to other sources as well.

Later chapters will help you use sources effectively in your writing. Chapter 2 will help you find online sources, use databases and search engines, and evaluate such sources for credibility. While the Internet is a nearly bottomless well of useful and enlightening information, it is also host to websites created by bigots, conspiracy theorists, and extremists--not to mention those who are well-intentioned but misinformed. Chapter 2 will help you sort the academically nutritious wheat from the Internet junk-food chaff.

Chapter 3 will help you avoid plagiarism, a cardinal sin. It will also acquaint you with paraphrasing and summarizing, and how to cite and document sources. Chapter 4 will introduce you to Research Navigator, a new online academic research service, and Chapters 5, 6, and 7 will show you how to use the service's three major databases. Chapter 8 will help you to use Research Navigator in a specific academic discipline.

Primary and Secondary Sources

Primary sources are firsthand evidence, based on your own or someone else's original work or direct observation. They can be documents, records, letters, diaries, novels, poems, short stories, autobiographies, interviews, and journals. This original quality adds to a source's reliability and impact on the reader.

Here is playwright Endesha Ida Mae Holland in her memoir, "From the Mississippi Delta" (1997):

> I was born into the double shotgun house at 114 East Gibb Street. Mama rented both sides of the clapboard house, which stood on raised posts. A confused patch of petunias hugged the ground at the end of the front porch. Inside, the crudely painted walls were peeling and patched with newspaper. The ceiling was so low that I could read "Little Lulu" on the funny pages pasted there. (pp. 19-20)

Holland goes on to describe the cracks in the linoleum floor that offered a view of the earth under the house and the patched roof that let in daylight and rain. Her brief account does more than describe a house: it tells us, indirectly but powerfully, about the poverty she was born into.

Secondary sources report, describe, comment on, or analyze the experiences or work of others. In college, most textbooks are secondary sources. As a piece of evidence, a secondary source is at least once removed from the primary source. It reports on the original work, the direct observation, or the firsthand experience. But it can have great value and impact as a source if the reporter or writer is reliable, either as a result of special experience (a journalist who spent years observing and reporting on the civil rights movement) or special training (a tooth-decay expert with a dental degree).

Newspapers are typical secondary sources. In a three-part series the *New York Times* published in January, 2003, reporters who examined the safety record of an Alabama-based pipe-making company concluded that it was "one of the most dangerous businesses in America." They based their conclusion on primary sources: company and government records and interviews with current and former employees, including plant managers, safety directors, and environmental engineers.

Here is a quote from the story:

> "The people, they're nothing," said Robert S. Rester, a former McWane plant manager who spoke at length about his 24 years with the company. "They're just numbers. You move them in and out. I mean, if they don't do the job, you fire them. If they get hurt, complain about safety, you put a bull's-eye on them." (Barstow & Bergman, Jan. 9, 2003, p. A1)

The *Times*, and most newspapers and magazines, are generally reliable secondary sources--although even highly-regarded publications make errors under the pressure of deadlines or competition. That's why sound research requires more than one source to back up a disputable claim.

Types of Sources

Print Sources

Newspapers, magazines, academic journals, documents, reference works, and personal papers are all print sources, although more and more of them exist in an online form as well.

For college research, the main tool for locating print sources that are not online is still the library. Many times you'll need to use electronic resources, especially the library catalog, to locate the print materials that you need to pull from the library's shelves. One major advantage of libraries: they come equipped with librarians. Reference-desk staffers can help you home in on the topic you need to research, come up with a research strategy, and determine the best tools to use in your research. The "Using Your Library" section of Research Navigator can also help you use a library's vast resources more efficiently.

Online and Database Sources

The Internet offers unlimited opportunities for research. Many print sources--newspapers, magazines, reference works, academic journals--are available online as well. One advantage of accessing print sources online, of course, is that you have millions of pages originating from across the globe at your fingertips. Another is that you can download and print a copy of an article for your files. Finally, many online-print sources are *searchable*: you can type a keyword into an archive or database to pull up the page you need. (Databases collect and organize content online so that users can find particular information. When did the "The Wizard of Oz" debut, and how many Oscars did it win? The Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com, will tell you. Searching online databases is a skill of its own that will be covered in the next chapter.)

Online content that is *not* print-based is even more varied. The most useful sites for research usually are informational and have URL addresses that end in **.edu** or **.gov**. "Edu" websites are sponsored by educational institutions, and they may include research results, reference works, subject indexes, and databases useful in many disciplines. "Gov" sites, sponsored by government agencies, offer a trove of primary sources: census information, federal codes and regulations, licensing records, property data, and health statistics. Sites that end in **.org** are sponsored by a nonprofit organization, such as Planned Parenthood, the National Rifle Association, or Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Some "org" sites offer reliable, usable information--but remember that they are usually sponsored by a group or individual that seeks to influence public opinion.

Although most commercial sites (those with **.com** URLs) exist to sell merchandise, some do offer information useful to students and researchers at

low or no cost. News sites are an example (www.nytimes.com, www.newsweek.com, www.washingtonpost.com). Most offer free access to at least the previous week's content. Unfortunately, more and more publications are charging for access to their archives--which contain the information most useful for research. Many college departments, however, buy a subscription to fee-charging online publications like the *Wall Street Journal* or news databases like LexisNexus. You will need to get a sign-on and password from your instructor or department office. (The online Research Navigator, www.researchnavigator.com, free with the purchase of any Prentice Hall college textbook, allows one-year access to the *New York Times*, along with searchable databases of academic and general interest publications and World Wide Web sites.)

Chapter 2

How to Find and Evaluate Online Sources

Finding Online Sources

Yes, there is a wealth of information on the Internet. In fact no one knows how many World Wide Web pages exist, because new ones are being created constantly--they number in the millions, certainly, and some say billions. But how do you find the information you need? And how do you make sure it is credible? Anyone with a few technical skills and access to a computer can publish on the Internet. Some sites offer information from experts; many sites are run by amateurs. Some sites are updated frequently; others, not at all.

To search the Web efficiently, it helps to be familiar with several different strategies and use the one that works best for your research topic. The two main vehicles for accessing information through the Internet are **subject directories** and **search engines**, which will be discussed in more detail in this chapter. If you try out several examples of both types, you will quickly find the search method you favor. Also, search engines and subject directories are not uniform in the techniques users must employ to narrow or broaden a search. So if you are comfortable with several methods of searching--using Boolean operators, truncation (or wild cards), and implied operators, also explained in this chapter--you will be able to switch more easily from one search engine or subject directory to another.

Strategies for Searching the Web

Tailor your search to the scope of the information you are seeking. To do this, you will need to understand **search engines**, **subject directories**, and **specialized databases**. A subject directory will take you through a sequence of Internet subjects. You might start with "history," move to "military history," then to "Civil War history," "Civil War battles," and arrive finally at the Battle of Gettysburg, your goal. Internet search engines locate specific Internet sites devoted to your topic (such as Military History Online's "Battle of Gettysburg" site). They often feature both subject directories and keyword searches.

Specialized databases, which usually search a targeted topic or aspect of a topic, are sometimes hard to find with search engines, but there are websites that specialize in collecting links to them. All three of these types of searching tools are explained in greater detail later in this chapter.

The two most popular organizers of Web content are probably Yahoo! (www.yahoo.com) and Google (www.google.com). Google is known mainly for its search engine, admired by many for the way it produces highly relevant results. Google does offer other services (discussion forums, a subject directory, and news sources) and is regularly adding new ones. Yahoo!, which is older, is known more as a Web **portal**, or a site that offers a range of resources and services, including e-mail, on-line shopping, games, and chat forums. As an information resource, Yahoo! was once identified with its subject directory, in contrast to Google's search engine. But in recent years, Yahoo! has added a search engine. In 2002, Yahoo!'s search engine--and others--began using Google's database in response to Google's popularity, as well as to criticism that Yahoo! search results could be influenced by advertisers who paid for inclusion in its database. Both Google and Yahoo! now accept commercial listings, but they are identified as "sponsored links" or "sponsored matches" and grouped separately, usually at the top of the first results page. Use caution when considering using any information from a site seeking to sell a product (see "Evaluating Online Sources," later in this chapter).

Subject Directories

For general, research-oriented queries, for browsing, and to view sites recommended by experts, use a subject directory. There are two basic types: academic and professional directories, which are most useful to researchers, and commercial portals that cater to the general public.

Here are some commercial portals:

- **About.com** www.about.com
- **Go.network** www.go.com
- **Lycos** www.lycos.com
- **Yahoo!** www.yahoo.com

For example, in early 2003, Yahoo!'s homepage featured 14 major categories as links to further information. Clicking on "Health" would take you to another page, with dozens more subcategories. Clicking on the subcategory "Teen Health" resulted in links to 60 websites on the subject. They ranged from a government site aimed at helping girls become "fit for life" to a men's magazine site that emphasized selling products as much as offering advice. Yahoo! and other commercial sites do not evaluate user-submitted content when adding Web pages to a database; they leave the evaluation up to the user.

Academic directories, on the other hand, are often annotated by experts and are usually the result of much thought and care. To get started on finding such

directories, try the University of Albany list of Internet Subject Directories (http://library.albany.edu/internet/subject.html). Other suggestions:

- **The Librarians' Index to the Internet** (www.lii.org). Sometimes called "the thinking person's Yahoo!."
- **The WWW Virtual Library** (www.vlib.org). One of the oldest and most respected subject directories on the Web. Many of the individual subject collections are maintained at universities.
- **INFOMINE** (infomine.ucr.edu). Compiled by the University of California at Riverside.

Search Engines

For targeted and complex queries, use a search engine. A search engine does not search the entire Internet; it searches **databases,** or collections of logically-related information, that are developed by the company hosting the search engine. That's why different search engines will produce different results. There are at least two ways for a page to be recorded in the search engine's database: the page's publisher can register it with the engine, or the search engine can use software called "spiders" to search the Internet and gather information that is then recorded in the engine's database.

Search engines may offer both subject directories and keyword searches. With most search engines, you enter your search terms and click on a "go" button or hit your return key. Then the engine generates a page with links to resources containing all or some of your terms. The resources are usually ranked by term: that is, one will rank higher if your search term appears many times, near the beginning of the document, in the title, and so forth.

A fairly recent development is a "second-generation" search engine, such as Google, which ranks Web pages according to the number of pages that link to them. This strategy adds an element of human judgment---in essence, it ranks a site by how popular it is--to computer technology. Many users start with Google, even for general queries, because it does such an excellent job of finding relevant documents.

Some popular search engines are:

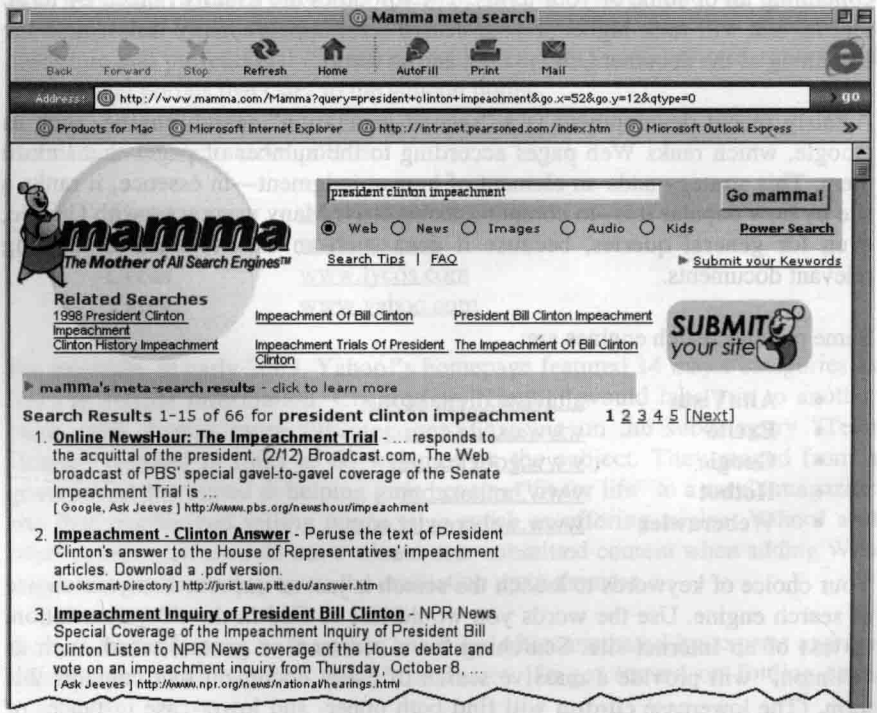
- **AltaVista** altavista.digital.com/
- **Excite** www.excite.com
- **Google** www.google.com/
- **Hotbot** www.hotbot.com
- **Webcrawler** www.webcrawler.com

Your choice of keywords to launch the search is just as important as your choice of search engine. Use the words you would like to find in the title, description, or text of an Internet site. Searching for a common or general word, such as "Clinton," will provide a massive search of every document that contains this term. (The lowercase **clinton** will find both upper- and lower-case instances of

the term.) In fact, **clinton** generated 6.9 million results from Google, ranging from Hillary Clinton's official Senate Web page, to a biography of President Clinton, to a Clinton County, Mich., government site--all on the first results page. You'll get more usable results by narrowing your query. Do you want a biography of President Clinton? Clinton's stand on a particular issue? A chronology of Clinton's impeachment trial? Using more than one keyword will narrow your results and make them more relevant to your needs; even with thousands of results, most search engines will put the most relevant pages at the top of the results list.

It's also possible to conduct too narrow a search. If you combine keywords for something like "Ulysses S. Grant's military strategy at Gettysburg," you may produce few or no results. Try dropping one or more keywords until you get a usable list of links.

A **metasearch engine**, instead of creating its own database of information, searches the databases of several search engines. For example, when you enter a query at the Mamma.com website, the engine simultaneously queries about ten of the major search engines, such as Yahoo!, Webcrawler, and Magellan. It then provides you with a short, relevant list of results. **President Clinton impeachment** generated 62 results from Mamma.com, from search engines Teoma, Ask Jeeves, MSN.com, and others. Results included primary sources such as government documents and secondary sources such as press coverage--a mixture that might be useful in writing a college paper.



Ixquick is particularly helpful if your topic is obscure or if you want to retrieve results from several search engines without generating an enormous list. Ixquick returns only the top ten relevancy-ranked results from the source search services.

Some popular metasearch engines:

- **Ixquick** www.ixquick.com
- **ProFusion** www.profusion.com
- **Dogpile** www.dogpile.com
- **Mamma.com** www.mamma.com
- **Metacrawler.com** www.metacrawler.com

Using Boolean Terms and Other Search Limiters

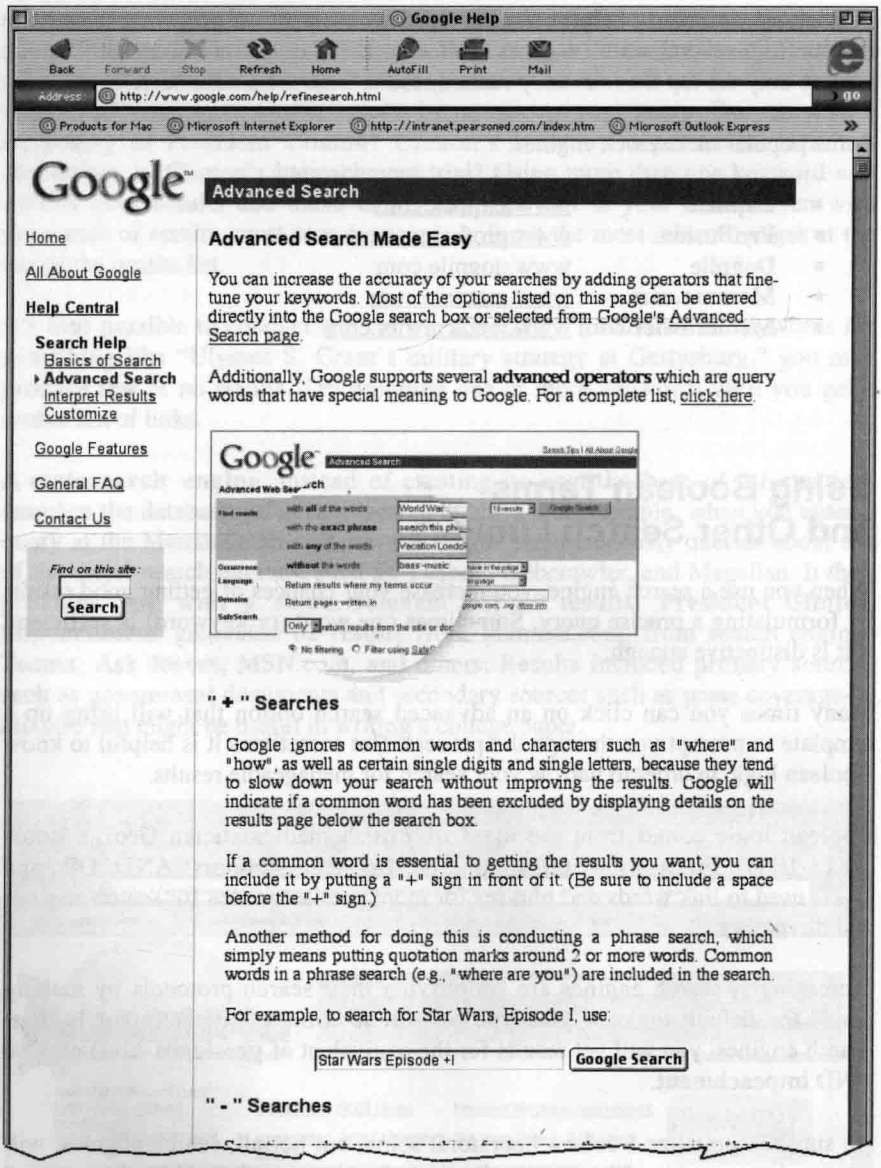
When you use a search engine, you increase your chances of getting good results by formulating a precise query. Sometimes one word (or keyword) is sufficient, if it is distinctive enough.

Many times you can click on an advanced search option that will bring up a template to prompt you through the process. But sometimes it is helpful to know Boolean logic in order to narrow your search for manageable results.

Boolean logic comes from the ideas of British mathematician George Boole (1815-1864). From his writings come the Boolean operators: AND, OR, and NOT, used to link words and phrases for more precise queries for search engines and directories.

Increasingly, search engines are simplifying their search protocols by making "and" the default logic. If you type **president clinton impeachment** in most search engines, you will get results for the equivalent of **president** AND **clinton** AND **impeachment**.

Be sure to capitalize Boolean operators; some, but not all, search engines, will assume lowercase "and" or "or" to be part of a phrase and consider them "stop" words to be ignored. (Stop words are prepositions, articles, conjunctions, and other common words like **I, an, the, for**.) Most sites offer a link to a page that explains their defaults and other search protocols. From Google's homepage, for example, click on "Advanced Search" and then "Advanced Search Tips" to find this page:



Boolean AND, OR, and NOT

The Boolean AND narrows your search by retrieving only documents that contain every one of the keywords you enter. The more terms you enter, the narrower your search becomes. Examples:

- gene AND therapy
- gene AND therapy AND risks

An Altavista search of **gene AND therapy** turned up more than 339,000 results; **gene AND therapy AND risks** generated 48,000.