

# Search the Web



GREENE COUNTY  
PUBLIC  
**Library**

# Some helpful definitions

- **Network**: system of computers interconnected in order to share information
- **Online**: available via a computer or computer network
- **File**: collection of related data stored as a unit with a single name (a document, a web page, a picture, a song)
- **Link**: shortened form of “hyperlink;” a piece of text or a graphic image that connects two Web documents. By clicking on the text or image, your browser “jumps” to another web page or part of a web page. Often, your mouse pointer will change from an arrow to a pointing hand to indicate a link.
- **Web page**: one document on the Internet. May include more information than can be seen on the screen, but does not encompass information retrieved by clicking on a hyperlink. You may have to scroll down to see the whole thing. One web page will have one web address.
- **Web site**: a set of interconnected web pages. They generally share the same “domain name.”
- **Search terms**: words or phrases you want to locate. Also called “keywords.”



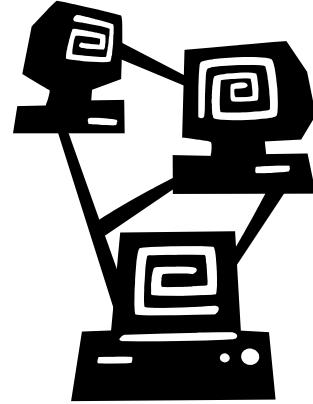
## What is the Internet?

The Internet is a network of computers linked to share information. The World Wide Web is the publicly accessible part of that network with agreed upon rules (protocols) for how information is presented and accessed.

## What kind of information can you find on the Internet?

Many subjects can be found via the Internet. “Everything” is not on the Internet. Someone has to be interested enough to put the information into an electronic file and make it accessible

- For example, courthouse records and many county government archives are not accessible – there are just not enough resources to pay staff to put these files online.



## Using Internet Sources

### Positives

- Information is posted instantly – it can have the very latest data.
- You can have access to your needed information almost anywhere (and experts can post from anywhere).

### Negatives

- Anyone can post something on the Web – not all the available information is factual or understandable.
- Information may be out of date – This can be hard to determine since websites always look shiny and new (no worn binding like a book or outdated pictures like a magazine). Whoever posts the website has to be willing to update it.
- Although it contains much information – it does not contain ALL information. Again, someone has to be willing to put the information “out there” and maintain it.



## How to find information on the Web

To find information on the Web when you do not know the address of a specific site to visit, you can use a search engine or a search directory to find several websites related to your topic of interest.

### Search Engines vs. Search Directories

**Search engine** – A website that maintains a database of websites. Websites and pages are gathered and indexed by a computer program called a “spider” or “web crawler.” The spider works by following all the hyperlinks on a starting page, and then all the links on all the new pages and so on. You find what you are looking for by typing a keyword in the search box. The search engine then searches its database for every instance of that word on any web page and returns links to every web page it finds.



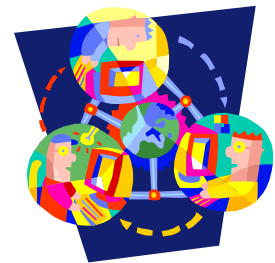
Examples:

[www.google.com](http://www.google.com)  
[www.ask.com](http://www.ask.com)

**Search directory** – A website on which humans collect and arrange hyperlinks to known web pages into a series of categories. The links have usually been annotated, so you know a little bit about the page before you click the link.

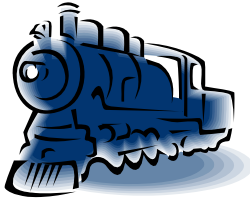
Examples:

[www.ipl.org](http://www.ipl.org) – Internet Public Library  
[www.lii.org](http://www.lii.org) – Librarians’ Index to the Internet  
[www.about.com](http://www.about.com) – About.com



## So which do I choose?

**Engines** will give you lots of results since they search the entire text of the pages. This can be good or bad: there is more information, but also much more to sort through. If a word is just mentioned on a page, the page will show up, regardless of whether that word is what the page is “about.”



For example: you type the word “florida” wanting web pages about traveling to Florida. Included in the results may be web pages about paying taxes in Florida, about the University of Florida, about the Florida Panthers, a blog entry about someone’s grandma who lives in Florida, the web page of the Florida Bar Association and many others.

If you are looking for a very specific and obscure topic, engines are the best way to go.

**Directories** are useful if you don’t know much about your topic beyond a broad subject. They are better if you are looking for general information about a popular topic. They are also good if you want sites that have been pre-selected by the editors. There will generally be fewer results that have little or nothing to do with your topic since they are all categorized by “aboutness” rather than indexing all the words on the page. On the other hand, directories have a smaller database of websites than search engines since the pages have all been selected by actual people. The databases may not be completely up to date for this same reason. The links to other websites may be old and not work anymore.



## Things to think about before you begin searching:

- **The web is huge!** Narrow down your search as much as possible beforehand, or start with a search directory.
- There are no standardized subject headings – unlike the library, cataloguers haven't decided how to index a topic, so you may have to try several options.
- Much of the information on the internet is not monitored, so consider what you are using the information for.



## Searching the Web

- Be specific.
- Try to use nouns as search terms.
- Typing in two different words for the same thing can yield far different results, so try to be as precise as you can  
For example: fish vs. salmon, daycare vs. babysitter
- If your search yields no results, you may have been too precise, or you may have misspelled a word.
- Many search engines will allow you to enter multiple terms, and this will help you narrow down results to what you actually want.  
For example: daycare Fariborn Ohio
- If you want a specific phrase to appear, like "Lake Erie," you need to put the phrase in quotation marks because most search engines look for each word individually. So, lake erie will turn up pages dealing with a lake near Erie, Pennsylvania along with pages about Lake Erie.
- There are some very common words that most search engines ignore and will not search for. These include "a," "an," "and," "the," forms of the verb "to be," "its," and prepositions. Not all search engines ignore the same words. You can usually find out which ones are ignored by clicking the help link. Some search engines *will* search these ignored words when they are in quotes.

## More tips for better searches:

- Spelling is very important – if something is spelled differently than how you are spelling it, you probably will not find many results. On the other hand, misspelling a word *will* find that exact spelling in a number of websites, reminding us that websites are created by people!
- Exclude words from your search – use a minus sign (-) or use the advanced search to narrow your results. Be *very careful* about excluding words because the computer will leave any web page that includes that word out completely. So if you are looking for pages about bananas, but do not want information about apples, you can choose to exclude the word apple, but that will cause any page with the word “apple” anywhere on it to be excluded. So a website called “All about bananas with no information whatsoever about apples” will be excluded because it has the word “apple” in the title.
- Always try synonyms – if the word you are using does not give you the results you want (or no results), some other term might yield better results.
- Think about what other words might be on a website about your topic and include them, too.
  - For example: anorexia bulimia “eating disorder”
- Try the advanced search page or check out the help page. – Many search engines and directories have a help page which will offer tips to searchers. You may find out you can do more efficient searches by reading this page. The advanced search page may let you exclude words, and specify what kind of website you want the information to come from (.edu, .mil)



## Evaluating a web page

The information you find on a web page is not necessarily authoritative or even true! Creators have all kinds of reasons for making sites, one of which may be to spread misinformation or scam people out of money. Authors may also have a genuine desire to educate, but possess wrong information themselves! It is your responsibility to evaluate each page and make decisions for yourself.

- Think about what is motivating the creators of the website – this is often indicated by the web suffix (.com .org .mil .edu .gov)
- Consider whether the website is trying to inform you, sell you something, or persuade you.
- Does the information on the site agree with other sites you've looked at?
- Check the “vital information” on the web page – reputable web pages will usually tell you when the page was last updated, give you the name of the page owner (person or organization) and give you information about contacting someone connected to the organization (an email address, phone number and/or physical address). If the site owner does not give you a way to contact them, what does that say about their reputability?
- Is there an author of the site listed? If so, what can you find out about him/her that indicates his/her level of expertise – what special knowledge do they have about the subject you are investigating?
- Check the publisher
  - Government? Organization? Company? School?
  - Often if the publisher is reliable, so is the information
- Check the language – Look for biases within the language itself

**For practice, look at and evaluate these two websites:**

[www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)  
[www.whitehouse.org](http://www.whitehouse.org)

