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Finding information on the World Wide Web

Before you start

If you are not familiar with using the WWW browser, *Internet Explorer®*, see *ins011 Introduction to the Internet using Internet Explorer®*

Introduction

The WWW has been likened to the world's largest library, containing millions of pages of information of varying interest and usefulness. It is changing constantly, with new sites appearing overnight and existing ones suddenly disappearing. Pages on the web are not in any particular order, nor is there any central reference catalogue or librarians to ask.

Fortunately, search tools have recently been developed to overcome this problem and help you find the information you are looking for. Websites such as Altavista, Yahoo, Lycos and Excite continuously compile and update all web sites available.

These Search Tools are commonly known as Search Pages, Search Engines or simply by their organisations name e.g. AltaVista (e.g. 'performing an AltaVista Search').

They tend to differ in their search capabilities, speed, frequency of updating, interfaces and the way in which results are displayed. The number of search engines is growing all the time.

There are Search Tools commonly called Meta Search engines, which take your search text and submit it to several search engines at once. AskJeeves (www.ask.co.uk) is a popular Meta search engine.

Searching the web with search engines

There are two ways you can use a search engine to find the information you need;

Searching - typing in search text to match against the title or content of web pages.

Browsing - looking inside predefined topics and interests (web directories) to find pages about a certain topic.

UK searching versus worldwide searching

Popular search engines such as AltaVista do have UK search pages (<http://uk.altavista.com>) for restricting your search to websites in the UK and not Worldwide.

Restricting searches to the UK holds two benefits:

1. The information you find will be UK information
2. Results will be returned more quickly since the search isn't trying to find matches against every site in the world.

Tip: Try to perform worldwide searches before midday, as the USA 'wakes up' around afternoon UK time - this increased usage tends to slow the Internet down.

Getting started

Windows PCs

1. Log into the computer using your username and password.
2. From the Desktop, double click the Internet Explorer® icon to open the Internet Explorer® web browser.

Macintoshes

1. Log into the computer using your username and password
2. Double click Macintosh HD
3. Double click the Programs folder
4. Double click the Internet Explorer® icon.

On both types of computer, *Internet Explorer*® will open and will automatically display the Information Services Student IT home page.

Note: If you experience any problems opening *Internet Explorer*® or starting the computer, contact the nearest Information Services Student Help Desk.

URLs

Each webpage has an address that uniquely identifies its location on the web. This web address is called a URL (Uniform Resource Locator). If you have the URL to a web page or site, you can directly access it by typing the URL into the browser.

Examples of URLs

<http://www.staffs.ac.uk> is the URL for Staffordshire University's home page

<http://www.staffs.ac.uk/uniservices/infoservices/student/> is the URL for Information Services' home page

<http://uk.altavista.com> is the URL for the AltaVista UK search page (note that this address begins with *http://* and not *http://www.*)

Note: an alternative URL that accesses the AltaVista UK search page is <http://www.altavista.co.uk>

⇒ Typing in a URL - accessing the AltaVista search engine

Located near the top of the browser window is a long white area, the Location Bar, already containing a URL e.g.

http://www.staffs.ac.uk/uniservices/infoservices/student/

1. Click inside the Location bar and use the **Delete** key to remove all text.
2. Once the URL has been deleted, type in...
http://uk.altavista.com
3. Press the **Enter** key.
4. You should now see the AltaVista - UK Search page.

⇒ **Performing a simple search (AltaVista)**

Basic searching is carried out in the same way from any search engine. However, for constructing more complex and precise searches, it can be useful to read the search engine's help facility or search tips.

All search pages provide a search box for you to type in search text, on AltaVista it is a white box in the centre of the page.

1. Click inside the search box, located near to 'Find'.
2. Type what you want to search for.

Tips when typing search text

- The power of any search is greatly increased by using several words.
 - It is generally recommended to type your search text in lower-case as the search will retrieve results typed in upper and lower case. If the search text is typed in uppercase, some search engines will only match against those results typed in uppercase, ignoring those in lowercase.
3. Select where you want to search. AltaVista has an option to search only the UK or search the entire World. (See page 1 for more information).
Next to the text Find Results: Click **United Kingdom** (the standard search setting) or **Worldwide**.
 4. Click the **Find** button to start the search.

What the results mean

The number of results retrieved varies greatly - from none to hundreds of thousands.

The results of a search are listed as links to web pages usually across a number of pages, eg ten links per page.

Results are generally listed in terms of accuracy/relevancy to the search text so it is advisable to refine your original search rather than looking past the second or third page of results.

Refining/extending a search

To find out how to refine or extend a search it's advisable to look at the help facility or search tips page of the search engine that you are using as the process does vary.

The following information has been taken from AltaVista's search tips page

Use an exact phrase.

If you know an exact phrase, put the phrase in quotes, for example: "House of Parliament".

Search for Web pages in a specific language

Using the Language drop-down menu in the search box. You can find all the documents on the Web about a given topic, written only in the language you specify. This type of search excludes Web sites written in any other language.

Note: this feature is only available for web page searches.

Example: If you select French in the language drop-down menu when searching for escargot, you will see pages written only in French and including the word escargot.

Include or exclude words.

To make sure that a word is always included in your search, place a plus sign (+) immediately before the keyword (no spaces) in the search box. To make sure that a word is always excluded from your search, place a minus sign (-) immediately before the keyword (no spaces) in the search box.

Example: To find recipes for chocolate cookies without chips, try recipe cookie +chocolate -chips.

Use wildcards.

By typing an asterisk (*) at the end of a keyword, you can search for multiple forms of the word.

Example: Try big*, to find big, bigger, biggest, and bigwig.

Use special characters and punctuation.

AltaVista Search defines a word as any combination of letters and numbers that is separated by any of the following:

White space, such as spaces, tabs, line ends, or the start or end of a document.

Special characters and punctuation, such as %, \$, /, #, and _.

AltaVista interprets punctuation as a separator for words. Placing punctuation or a special character between each word (with no spaces between the characters and the words) is another way to indicate a phrase.

Example: Entering Jean-Luc Picard is easier than entering "Jean Luc" Picard, which is also acceptable, but requires more keystrokes. Hyphenated words, such as x-files, are also considered phrases because of the hyphen.

Note: If you do use special characters to indicate phrases, be careful to avoid *, +, and -, since they perform unique functions (see above). You may decide only to use double quotes in your phrases to avoid confusion.

Additional information about refining searches

Some search engines interpret two or more search words separated by a space as meaning 'find matches for this word OR this word'. For example, a search for 'tropical fish' would be interpreted as, 'search the web for pages that match tropical OR fish'.

When using AltaVista to display pages in a particular language, a change in computer set up may be required to display Greek or Chinese text etc.

Web Directories

Links to web pages are stored in web directories by subject and permit a more structured approach to searching by looking at a broad topic and clicking on links to narrow the topic down to a more specific level.

For example, to find web pages about tropical fish using AltaVista's web directories you would click on the following subject links...

- Hobbies & Interests
 - Pets & Animals
 - Fish & Aquariums

⇒ Browsing through Web Directories in AltaVista

1. From the list of options near the top of the AltaVista page, click the **Web Directory** link, and then select one of the main subject topics.
2. Explore different topics by clicking on new subject links or performing a search within a Web Directory.

Combining searching and browsing can lead to more efficient web searches. For example, searching for fish within the web directory *Pets and Animals* is more efficient than performing a simple UK search for fish which could retrieve results about anything connected with fish, e.g. angling, fish recipes, fish and chips!

Usenet & Newsgroups

Usenet is a collection of hundreds of millions of email messages and email discussions covering a huge range of topics where you can read, reply or send messages. Discussions take place in subject specific areas called Newsgroups - some groups are particularly active with many new daily postings. They can provide a rich source of information whether seeking opinions on educational matter, learning a new piece of software, or advice about hobbies and interests.

Usenet has ten or so general themes, each one containing a vast amount of newsgroups.

For example, a newsgroup called 'aquaria' is stored under the theme of 'rec', short for recreational (Games, hobbies, sports...) and is written as rec.aquaria.

Rec.aquaria contains discussions concerning fish keeping as well as other more specific newsgroups about fish, such as freshwater fish or goldfish.

Note that there may be other newsgroups about the same topic stored under different themes, such as Alt.

Using Google to view Newsgroups

There are search engines that can view and search Usenet newsgroups, a popular one is called Google (URL: <http://groups.google.com/>)

Note that as well as being a search tool for newsgroups, Google is also a search engine for searching web pages (URL: <http://www.google.co.uk>)

Reading newsgroup messages

- Messages posted to a particular newsgroup are listed most recent first, and can be read by clicking them. While reading the message you can also read any replies to it.
- Google refers to the original posting as a 'Threaded subject' and replies to the posting are called 'Threads', the original message and its replies forming a topic of conversation of their own.
- An indication of the number of replies a message has received is provided in brackets next to the message e.g. (31 articles)

Addresses for some popular search engines

<http://uk.altavista.com/>
<http://uk.yahoo.com/>
<http://www.hotbot.com/>
<http://www.google.co.uk>
<http://www.lycos.co.uk>
<http://www.excite.co.uk>
<http://www.askjeeves.co.uk>

Before you leave

Log out from the computer.

Where to go for more help or information.

Further advice and information is available from the Information Services Help Desks.

Many Information Services documents are on the web at:

<http://www.staffs.ac.uk/uniservices/infoservices/documents/>