

RESEARCH CONCEPTS & PRACTICE

Top Level Websites & Search Engine Strategies

“Top Level” Websites

Don't reinvent the wheel! One of the best ways to begin the Web portion of your research is by identifying top-level sites with given authority. Think about what kind of information you need, and then identify a government agency or a well-known and trusted organization/institution who would track and disseminate information on that topic. For instance:

For Information on...	You might try visiting the...
Breast or other cancers	National Cancer Institute American Cancer Society
Education-related issues	U.S. Department of Education California Department of Education
West Nile Virus or other diseases	Center for Disease Control Medline Plus
Air pollution or other environmental issues	Environmental Protection Agency
Any aspect of California agriculture	California Dept. of Agriculture University of California
Nuclear safety issues	U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission

Top level sites will not only be a likely source of high-quality information on your topic, but will often provide links to other relevant Web sites to visit for more knowledge.

Methods for identifying appropriate top-level agencies include:

1. Web sites suggested by CQ Researcher and Issues & Controversies;
2. Agencies, organizations, and specific publications mentioned in books and articles you've already found.
3. Discussions with your librarian and professor.
4. Infomine, sponsored by The University of California (infomine.ucr.edu)

Specific Search Engine Strategies

Strategy One: Using quotation marks to indicate a phrase

Search engines are key word animals. When you type in the words **community college**, Google will look for Web sites containing the words *community* and *college*. In some instances these words may be together in the order you've written them, for example: "Student Success in the California *Community College*"

In other cases your search terms will appear in different parts of the document, for example: "Local *college* graduate Joe Blow lives in a bedroom *community* outside of San Francisco"

By enclosing two or more words in quotation marks, you are telling the search engine to only retrieve those documents in which your terms appear in the exact order you've written them.

Strategy Two: Including all the concepts in your research statement to narrow your search (Boolean AND)

The more terms you include in your search, the fewer documents you will find. Including all the concepts from your research statement ensures you will effectively sort through all the information available on your topic to find those documents that directly support your specific research.

Strategy Three: Including synonyms to catch more relevant sites (Boolean: OR)

Sometimes concepts can be described in several different ways. For instance young people can be described as **children, kids, or youth**. **Drugs, narcotics,** and "**controlled substances**" are all different words/phrases that describe a similar concept. To ensure you find all the quality information on your topic, sometimes it is necessary to construct a search that looks for all the terms that describe the concepts in your research statement.

Strategy Four: Find documents that contain your search terms in their titles.

Documents containing your search terms in their title are likely to focus more on your topic than those documents that only contain your terms somewhere in their text.

Strategy Five: Searching for certain types of documents (domain limitation)

The web is divided into several different domains. Some of the major domains are: educational (.edu), government (.gov), organizational (.org), and commercial (.com). When looking for sources for academic projects, it is useful to limit your search to those documents originating in educational institutions or sponsored by the government. Sometimes organizations provide useful information – especially medical organizations – but often organizational sites are very biased. BE CAREFUL – EVALUATE ALL DOCUMENTS, REGARDLESS OF DOMAIN!

Strategy Six: Searching for PDF documents

Often PDF documents have already been published in print format; therefore, many of them have already been through some sort of editorial process. Although this doesn't let you off the hook in terms of evaluation, it does mean you have a better chance of finding documents with the proper authority.