

Decoding Technology

Search Engines

by Tim Walker and Chip Donohue



When it comes to searching the Internet, early childhood administrators are no different than other professionals. They tend to rely on a single search engine for information by entering a few keywords and clicking “search.” Sometimes the results that come back are useful, but more than likely it requires sorting through thousands of matches just to find a few Web pages that are relevant. The following tech terms, tools, and tips can help you break out of this pattern and improve your online researching skills.

Tech Terms

- **Search Engine:** A software program that maintains a database of Web pages and allows a user to enter search criteria to retrieve information.
- **Meta Search Engine:** A software program that searches the databases of multiple search engines based on a user’s search criteria. The information retrieved is combined into a single list.
- **Spider/Crawler:** A component of a search engine that wanders the World Wide Web, indexing keywords and storing Web page addresses.
- **Subject Directory:** A feature offered by some search engines that provides users with a searchable catalog of Web pages that has been organized by human editors into a hierarchical tree.
- **Query:** A request for information from a search engine’s database.
- **Results:** A list of Web pages based on a user’s search criteria.
- **Operator:** A word or symbol used to combine search words or define relationships between them.
- **Stop Word:** Common words such as THE, A, and OF that are ignored by most search engines and tend to slow down searches without improving the results.
- **Match:** A Web page that appears on a search engine’s list of results.
- **Relevancy:** How closely a particular match provides information the user is searching for.

- **False Drop:** A match that does not provide relevant information to the user.
- **Ranking/Positioning:** The location of a match on a search engine’s list of results.

Tech Tools

There are several types of searches you can conduct. Many search engines include a form that makes the process even easier. To open and use this form, locate a link titled **ADVANCED** or



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Common Operators for Google™, Yahoo!® Search, and Ask.com™

plus (+)	Place in front of words that must be included in the results (e.g., children +health)
minus (-)	Place in front of words that must be excluded from the results (e.g., nutrition -adults)
asterisk (*).....	Place at the end of all or part of a word to find other versions of it (e.g., assess*)
tilde (~).....	Place in front of a word to also search for its synonyms (e.g., ~literacy) — Google™ only
site.....	Place in front of words to find where they appear in a particular Web site (e.g., accreditation site: www.naeyc.org)
intitle	Place in front of words to find where they appear in Web page titles (e.g., intitle:parenthood)
inurl.....	Place in front of words to find where they appear as part of a Web site address (e.g., inurl:kids)
link	Place in front of a Web site address to find other sites pointing to its homepage (e.g., link: www.nhsa.org)
define.....	Place in front of a word or phrase to find its definition (e.g., define:best practice) — Google™ only
last	Use to find Web pages that are within a specified time period (e.g., conference last:month) — Ask.com™ only

ADVANCED SEARCH around the search box. Search engines are also constantly changing the operators they accept and how searches are processed, so some of the information contained in this list may already be outdated. A search engine's help feature is the best way to keep current.

- **Keyword search** — This is the simplest and most common type of search conducted. Web pages are retrieved based on one or more words you specify. Try a simple search using the keywords *curriculum ideas*.
- **Phrase search** — Many times the order of your words matters. Phrase searching requires that words be in a specific order. Some search engines have a phrase mode that you can use.

Others may require you to place quotes around your words before conducting a search. For example, try placing quotes around “*American Academy of Pediatrics*” to locate information about the organization.

- **Boolean search** — There might be a logical relationship among your words. Boolean searching uses operators such as OR, AND, and NOT between words to help you define a relationship. Attempt to locate Web sites that discuss both *playground AND safety*.
- **Fuzzy search** — Perhaps you're unsure of the correct spelling for a word, or only have a partial spelling for it. Fuzzy searching uses operators (sometimes called wildcards) to locate relevant matches. A few

common ones are the asterisk (*), dollar sign (\$), question mark (?), and percentage sign (%). For instance, a search using *reggio em%* should find matches containing Reggio Emilia.

- **Proximity search** — Maybe you want to dictate how close together words should appear. Proximity searching does this by using operators such as NEAR, ADJ, near/n, and w/n (where n is the number of words apart). A search for *special NEAR education* should find matches where these words appear in the vicinity of each other. Many search engines today automatically rank pages higher based on how close together search words appear, so in some cases it is not necessary to use an operator.
- **Image search** — It's possible that you'll want to use words to find images. Image searching looks for images based on filenames and text related to images, such as *school bus* or *swing*. Locate a link titled IMAGES around the search box and click on it before you start a search.

Tech Tips

The Web contains more information and resources than you could ever hope to use. It is sometimes referred to as the world's largest library. Here are some tips to help you make sense out of all this information and to find what you are looking for in an efficient matter:

- Most search engines are not case sensitive, meaning all letters are recognized as lower case. For instance, a search for NAEYC and naeyc will return the same results.
- True search engines are great to use when you specifically know what you are looking for and need the information quickly. Popular search engines like Google™

(www.google.com) and Ask.com™ (www.ask.com) are excellent places to start.

- Meta search engines are best to use when you want to conduct an extensive search across the Web and receive the results from multiple search engine databases blended together in a single list. MetaCrawler® (www.metacrawler.com) and Mamma.com (www.mamma.com) are two of the more notable meta search engines.
- Subject directories are good starting points when you are searching for general information or don't have an exact idea of where to begin. They allow you to browse a set of main categories and then branch out into subcategories, topics, and subtopics. Yahoo!® Search Directory (<http://dir.yahoo.com>) and LookSmart® (www.looksmart.com) include directories that are known for their exceptional organization and degree of relevance.

Tech Links

According to the Nielsen//NetRatings, the top five most popular search engines are Google™, Yahoo!® Search (<http://search.yahoo.com>), MSN Windows Live™ Search (www.live.com), AOL® Search (<http://search.aol.com>), and Ask.com™. These are a few other search engines you may want to consider:

- AlltheWeb
www.alltheweb.com
- AltaVista™
www.altavista.com
- Dogpile®
www.dogpile.com
- Web Search
www.websearch.com
- WebCrawler®
www.webcrawler.com

Sources

- Nielsen//NetRatings
www.nielsen-netratings.com
- Search Engine Dictionary
www.searchenginedictionary.com
- Search Engine Watch
www.searchenginewatch.com

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