Introduction to search types

There are three principal ways of searching the Web: search engines, subject guides and 'real language' search pages.

Search engines allow you to type in words connected with the information you are looking for – these words are then compared with a database of webpages and their contents. Having matched the search words with pages in the database, the search engine displays a list of documents for you to consult. An example of a good search engine is Google (http://www.google.com).

TIP ☑

All search sites have help pages – make sure you visit them and find out how they work – five minutes spent doing this will save many hours and ease the frustration of bad search results.

In the early days of Internet cataloguing, there was only really one contender in the search world, and that was Yahoo! These days, there are hundreds of search sites on the Web, all with different databases, collections, and, of course, webpages. Searching for something on the Web has almost been made more difficult by the proliferation of search sites. But, whichever search site you decide to use, here are some questions you should be asking yourself:

- What exactly am I looking for? (webpage, image, etc.);
- Is this a general or specific search? (general searches work best in a subject guide, whilst specific searches are best left to search engines);
- How much information do I want? (some search agents feature reviews, summary of page content, etc.);
- Can I use the search engine? (some search pages are very difficult to use properly and require a full reading of the help page).

Since it has the biggest database, most people tend to think that Google should be the best search site, and to some extent this is true when we consider a general search. However, a search for 'Apollo 13' on Google will give you far more page references to space technology and disasters than pages leading to reviews of the film of the same name. If you want to find out about the film 'Apollo 13', your best bet would be to search one of the movie databases on the Web (e.g. the Internet Movie Database at

http://www.imdb.com). It's all a question of what you want to find – and then working out the best way to find it.

Refining searches using a search engine

As I pointed out in the introduction to this section, visiting a search page on the Web, typing in the word 'Australia' and hitting the *Submit* button will get you a list of millions of sites to visit. Starting this way leaves the user with a wealth of information, and a potential lifetime of investigation on this one subject alone. So just how can a search be refined in order to limit the number of page references returned? The answer lies in the shape of 'operators' and punctuation. Let's see what these tools are:
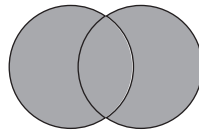

TIP ☑

Google can search for webpages in most languages. If you are looking for resources in Spanish or French or a language other than English, try changing your *Preferences* at the top of the Google screen.
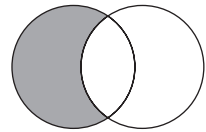

AND, OR AND NOT

These look for various combinations of search words and operate like this:
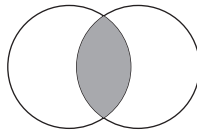
AND · · · · · · · OR · · · · · · · NOT

- **AND** (+) looks for documents featuring **all** words in the search entry box;
- **OR** looks for documents featuring **any** of the words in the search entry box;
- **NOT** (-) looks for documents featuring **some** words, but not others.

Therefore a search for *EFL AND London* should take you to sites connected with teaching English as a Foreign Language in London, whereas a search for *EFL NOT London* will find you all the sites on the subject anywhere else in the world. A search done using *EFL OR London* should give you a list of both types of site (and a lot more).

> **TIP** ☑
>
> Some search engines use the words 'AND' and 'NOT", others use the mathematical symbols '+' and '−'. To find out which ones to use on a particular search engine, read the help file. Google will do all this for you from the *Advanced Search* page.

These three search words can be 'nested' (i.e. combined), providing very close matches: *EFL **AND** London **AND** (study **OR** teach)*. That is if you're looking for information about studying or teaching English in London.

Notice the options: 'with **all** of the words' is the equivalent of using AND, 'with the **exact phrase**' is the same as enclosing your search in inverted commas, 'with **at least one** of the words' is the same as a random search for all the words separately, and '**without** the words' will exclude any words typed in that particular box (NOT).

HANDS ON

Try going to the Advanced Search page of Google and doing some searches using the options described above. See if you can find the address of my personal homepage, not my business one, which was given earlier in this section. Gavin is not the most common name in the world, but you won't want to find all the Gavins.

If you don't have too much luck, you'll find the address towards the end of this section of the book.

Note: These search terms are taken from the world of mathematics and are sometimes referred to as Boolean Operators. If you see this term anywhere on the Internet, just think AND, OR and NOT.

PUNCTUATION

Punctuation (as the word is used in the context of a search site) allows the user to look for phrases (or parts of phrases) in Web documents. This is probably the most common way of searching. Punctuation in this context refers to the use of inverted commas.

When you use inverted commas you have to put yourself in the place of the person who wrote the page you are looking for. Let's suppose you are looking for some information about Marilyn Monroe for a class about famous people – if you made a page about her, what would you include? (pictures, biography, filmography, etc.) So, you could start with a search along these lines: *"biography of Marilyn Monroe"*. The words have to occur next to each other, and in that order as part of a phrase to score a hit with the search.

TIP ☑

Using inverted commas is one of the best tips to teach your students. One of my students in Barcelona once tried searching for "the Sting's biography," instead of "biography of Sting" – a common mistake for Spanish learners of English. He didn't find anything, but he soon learnt not to make the same mistake in English!