

How search engines work

Basically search engines do one of three things:

- some (like Yahoo) hold lists of sites in categories. These are like telephone directories, a compilation of sites sent to the 'owner' of the list. You search these by refining the categories within which you are looking.
- some (like Alta Vista) crawl through the web looking for sites. You search through what they have found.
- Some (like AskJeeves) do both of the above and also look at what other search engines have found.
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For these reasons (and because they use a variety of criteria to rank the sites they find) different search engines give different results and are useful for different purposes. All the useful sites let you search on multiple criteria. Some, like AskJeeves have a 'natural language' interface that tries to make sense of a 'real' question. Others use Boolean operators.

One final point. The amount of information on the web is increasing at an explosive rate. No search engine can keep up to date with this. Therefore they tend to be less use in looking for recent documents and much more use in looking for older ones. This tendency is exacerbated by the fact that some search engines rank the sites they find on the basis of how many times they have listed them before, and others on the basis of how many other sites on the net are linked to the given site. Of course both of these tend to favour older sites. So - you are unlikely to find any references to today's electronic version of the Times but a number to editions which appeared last year!

Finding out more

A useful (and searchable!) list of search engines can be found at the Searchenginewatch.com site. This site also [describes how search engines work](#), holds [reviews](#) of them and [tutorials](#) in using them. Another useful tutorial can be obtained from the library of the University of California, [Berkeley](#).