

# Internet Search Strategies

by Claire T. Dygert

Most new computers today come equipped with a modem and the software necessary to connect to the Internet. What's missing, however, is a primer on how to find your way around once you're online. Lately, browsers and service providers have included features that make it easier to find what you're looking for, but most of these are consumer oriented. If you're searching in a specialty area, like construction, you're on your own.

As a librarian specializing in electronic resources, I spend much of my time helping people find information, and these days the search often extends to the Internet. Here's some of what I've learned about streamlining an Internet search.

## Surfing Into Oblivion

Although the World Wide Web is just a part of the Internet, it's the part most people use. When you understand how documents are linked together on the Web, you realize how apt the name is. But new users can waste a tremendous amount of time jumping from page to

page, making the Web seem more like a maze. Lured by the tantalizing gem of information or entertainment just beyond the next "link," you quickly discover that there is also an incredible amount of junk on the Internet, which has to be sifted through before you find what you want.

## Needle in a Haystack

I've come to think of the Internet as a library where all the books and magazines have been heaped into a giant pile on the floor. Finding what you're looking for seems impossible, until you discover a tool called a "search engine." Search engines are computer programs that sort through the giant heap of Web information based on specific key words or phrases the user provides. Search engines are available from Web sites of their own or from centralized Web sites, or "meta-sites," that contain many search engines, such as [www.search.com](http://www.search.com) (see Figure 1). Both the Netscape and Microsoft browsers also have a built-in search feature that

lets you access your favorite search engine right from the toolbar.

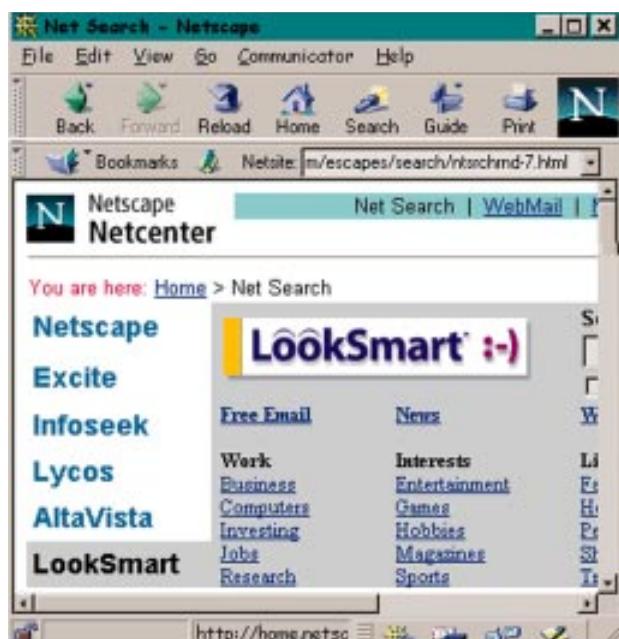
Choosing the best search engine from the dozens available isn't easy, because each one has its own approach to indexing the Internet. Yahoo ([www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com)), for example, is compiled by human beings, whereas HotBot ([www.hotbot.com](http://www.hotbot.com)) and InfoSeek ([www.infoseek.com](http://www.infoseek.com)) rely on automated Web "spiders" — software programs that continuously scan the Web and compile content databases automatically. One thing for sure, the technology behind the search engine is changing constantly, so the search engine that's a dog today might be king tomorrow.

## Fine-Tuning the Search

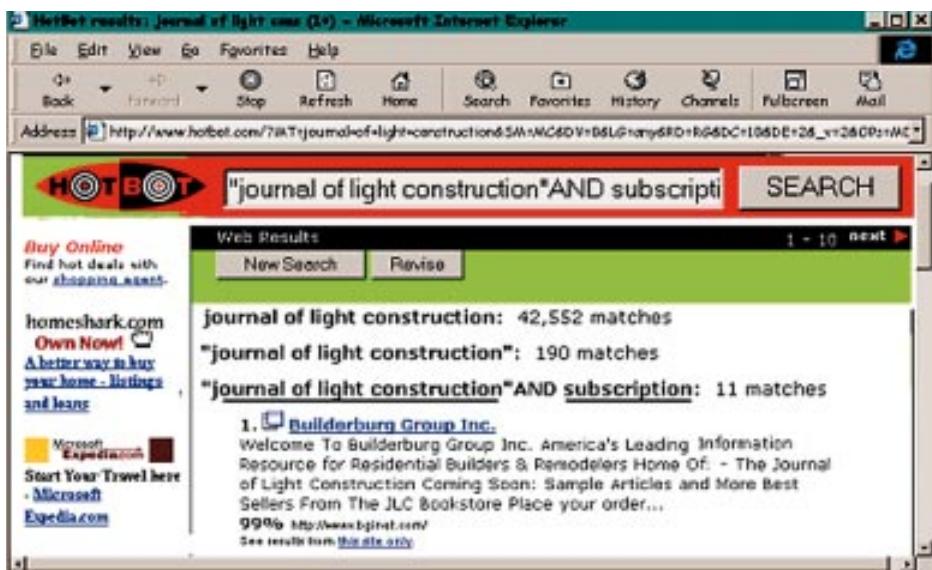
Even though search engines work differently, the principles for using them are similar. Figure 2, shows what happened when I searched on *journal of light construction*. My goal was to find a place to subscribe to the magazine online. My initial search returned more than 42,000 results, because the search engine was simply looking for sites containing any one of the four key words I'd typed in.

To narrow the results, I enclosed the words in quotations and searched again. This simple change instructed the search engine to search for the exact phrase, and the results were reduced to 190. Librarians call this "bound phrase" searching and it is one of your best bets for finding information on the Internet.

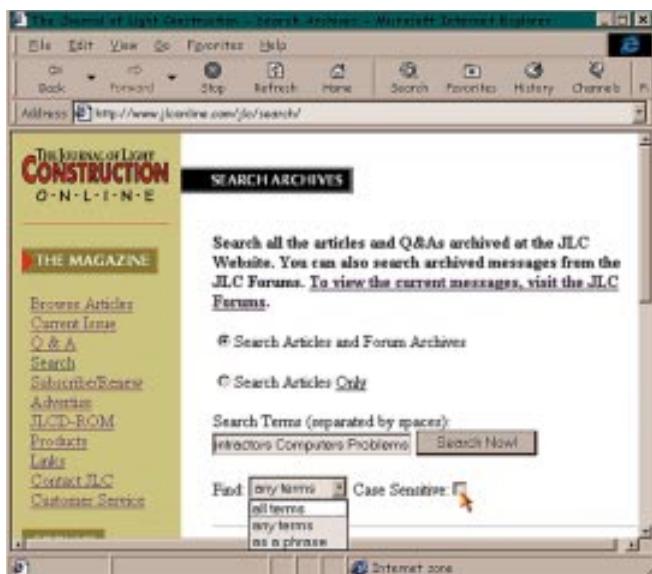
Still not satisfied, I took the search one step further by adding what is known as Boolean logic. Named after logician George Boole, this method uses "operators," like AND, NOT, and OR, to more clearly define the search. By rephrasing the search string to "*journal of light construction*" AND *subscription*, I was returned



**Figure 1.** Netscape and other major Web browsing software provide a search button on the toolbar that connects to a meta-site, where users can pick from several search engines. Specific search engines can also be accessed directly at their Web addresses, such as [www.hotbot.com](http://www.hotbot.com).



**Figure 2.** In this HotBot search, the words *journal of light construction* were entered in the search window, and returned more than 42,000 matches. Simply adding quotes around the words tells the search engine to search for the title instead of individual words, reducing the number of results to 190. Finally, the Boolean command AND was inserted, along with the word *subscription*, narrowing the search to 11 results.



**Figure 3.** Search engines embedded in individual Web sites are an excellent way to limit the search to that particular site. JLC Online lets users structure a Boolean search using drop-down menus.

just 11 results, with the one I needed at the top of the list.

You may be able to fine-tune your search even further if you have more information to start with. For example, HotBot allows you to search for just the title of a Web document. Well-designed Web sites often have a title that is descriptive of the entire site, so this type of search will return a tightly focused list of results. Other syntax tricks might include asterisks (\*) between words to indicate that they *must* appear in the document, or the use of the operator NEAR to force the search engine to find

the keywords only if they are near each other in the document (although not necessarily adjacent to one other).

Finally, individual sites often have search engines embedded within them, allowing you to limit the search to articles on that particular site. Figure 3 shows the search engine at JLC Online. In this case, Boolean searches can be put together from a simple drop-down list.



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