

Internet Sources: Directories vs. Search Engines

As a rule, there are two basic ways to locate information on the web: one is to use a **subject directory**, and the other is to use a **search engine**. Below are some of the fundamental differences with the two approaches to finding information.

Directories

What: Directories are a collection of web sites that are organized by broad subject categories. When you search a directory, you are only searching the web sites identified and included in that directory. Directories may be broad (covering all subject areas), or subject specific (focusing on a particular subject).

How: Directories are created by people. People have identified web sites and then organized them for you. A good directory will also evaluate web sites for quality and reliability before including them in the directory.

Why: Why use a directory, as opposed to a search engine?

- The human element: this is particularly true if the directory is selective in the web sites it chooses to include. Check on the criteria that a directory uses for web site inclusion - some directories are very selective, others are not.
- Browsing: directories tend to work best when you want to browse a relatively broad subject. Starting with a directory can give you a good idea about the amount and type of web based information on your topic.

Types of Directories:

- **General Web Directories:**
 - Covers all subject areas
 - Not selective - tend not to evaluate web sites for quality
 - Large in size - will include and organize millions of web sites
- Examples of General Web Directories
 - [Yahoo Directory](#)
 - [Google Directory](#)
 - [Open Directory](#)

- **Academic Web Directories:**
 - Covers most academic subjects and disciplines
 - Selective - some are more selective than others
 - Limited in size - favoring quality over quantity

- Examples of Academic Web Directories:
 - [Librarian's Index to the Internet](#)
 - [Infomine](#)

- **Subject Web Directories:**
 - Covers a specific subject or discipline area
 - Selective - tend to be quite selective
 - Limited in size - limited by the nature of the subject

- Examples of Subject Web Directories: There are thousands of subject directories available - far too many to list. Here are a few to give you an idea:
 - [Best of History Web Sites](#)
 - [Psychcentral](#)
 - [FindLaw](#)

Search Engines

What: When you use a search engine to search the web, you are searching only the web pages and web objects (i.e. PDF files) that the search engine has identified at a given point in time. You are not seeing everything that is available to you on the web - no search engine can do that. You are not searching the web in "real time" - only a given point in time.

How: Search engines use software called "spiders" and "crawlers" to routinely scour the web to identify and index web pages. The software used by each search engine works a bit differently. Consequently, the same search conducted with different search engines will yield different results. You may want to try your search in more than one search engine and compare results.

Why: Why use a search engine, as opposed to a directory?

- Size: when you use a search engine, you are searching through billions of web pages.
- Searching for Specific Information: If you are looking for very specific or complex information, try a search engine. Advanced search features will allow you to refine your search and improve your results.

- Ranked Results: search engines use algorithms (a mathematical formula) to place the most relevant web sites at the beginning of the result list.
- **Caution:** There is no guarantee that information found on the web is credible or reliable. Critically evaluate any information you use for academic assignments - especially information found on the web.
- Examples of Search Engines:
 - [Google](#)
 - [Yahoo Search](#)
 - [Live Search \(MSN\)](#)
 - [Ask](#)