Search slips and tips

1. Introduction

Searching the web can be frustrating. Search engines don't always find the information you're looking for.

There are some common pitfalls that you can avoid. This activity will help you to think about the information you need and the approach you take to finding it.

Learning outcome

By the end of this activity you should be able to avoid pitfalls and disappointments and conduct more effective searches.

2. Where did they go wrong?

These three short case studies outline some of the problems people encounter when searching for information.

Verity, Jamil and Eshe were all unsuccessful when they searched for information. Read about their experiences below.

What tips would you give to help them to search more effectively next time? You might like to make a few quick notes to compare with the suggestions in the next section.

Verity

Verity would love to visit New Zealand for a holiday, but she's worried about developing deep vein thrombosis (DVT) during the long flight. A friend suggests that compression stockings might help to reduce the risk.

Verity decides to find out more by searching Google for 'compression stockings'.

The stockings are available from lots of retailers and Verity will not have any difficulty obtaining them. But she's disappointed not to find any clear information about their effectiveness and the benefits of wearing them during a long flight.

Jamil

Jamil is compiling a briefing paper about the benefits of green spaces in urban areas.

The deadline for the document is tomorrow and his knowledge of the topic is limited. Jamil wants to find some reliable information to encourage investment in urban greening projects.

He spends the morning looking for information and finds some websites that appear relevant. But by lunchtime he realises he hasn't found very much evidence to include in his briefing.

With the deadline looming, Jamil is feeling anxious that he will not complete the paper in time.

Eshe

Eshe is writing a magazine article about Puglia in Italy. She's heard it has some lovely beaches and wants to feature some examples. She'd like to inform her work by reading travelogues and blogs by people who have recently visited the region. Do they all agree that the beaches are special? She tries a quick Google search for relevant information.

She finds lots of promotional material, but little about the day-to-day experiences of recent visitors.

3. What would you suggest?

While Verity, Jamil and Eshe all had some idea of the information they needed, they were disappointed with the material returned by their searches.

Read through each case study to discover how they could have improved their searches.

Verity

Verity's search inundated her with information because it was too broad.

She can focus it by adding more keywords, such as:
"compression stockings" "long haul flight" "DVT" "benefits" "effectivness" or "NHS".

Although Verity had some idea about the sort of information she wanted, she relied on the search engine to find it for her without specifying exactly what she is looking for.

If Verity had invested a few minutes to think about her question before beginning her search, and even scribbled down some likely keywords, the search engine might have returned more relevant information about the topic from authoritative sources.

Jamil

Although Jamil found some relevant websites when he searched Google for "urban green spaces", he spent too long exploring the material for suitable information to support his briefing.

Like Verity, Jamil would have benefited from investing some time to think about his research question.

For example, what type of information is he looking for? Does he want articles published in academic journals? Case studies? Reports prepared by government departments, charities or professional organisations?

Also, which themes does Jamil want to emphasise in his briefing? Urban regeneration? The health and wellbeing of residents? Crime reduction? The provision of habitat for wildlife?

This would have helped him to compile a list of keywords to help focus his search. He may have found more relevant material if he'd used Google Scholar instead of Google.

If you have plenty of time, exploring material returned by your searches can provide you with lots of ideas.

If you're working to a deadline like Jamil:

- Sketch out a plan so you have a clear idea of what you're looking for
- Set a time limit for your search
- Stick to your search plan and don't get distracted
- Keep a record of the keywords you've used so you don't waste time by repeating the same search

Eshe

Although a little fiddly to use, Eshe could try the 'advanced search' options in Google to focus her search. For example, she can limit her search to keywords featured in the title of web pages. She can also set the search engine to only return information published during a given timescale, such as the last month. She can even limit her search to material published in a selected country and language.

4. Summary

If Verity, Jamil and Eshe had invested a little more time to prepare their searches, they may have been more successful in finding the information they needed.

Verity needed to think about keywords to help focus her search. Jamil could have used the Google Scholar search engine to find research articles and reports to support his work. And, like Verity, he also needed to identify keywords to focus on the themes he wanted to highlight. While Eshe could have used 'advanced search' options to refine her Google search.

Hints and tips:

- Think about keywords before you begin a search
- Use 'advanced search' options to refine your search
- Google Scholar will help you to find research papers and reports

Next Steps

Reflect on what you have learned from this activity. How can you use the knowledge you've gained to improve the way you search for information?