

# Being digital

## Filtering information quickly

### 1: Introduction: Too much information, too little time

You are probably familiar with the term 'information overload'. It is easy to search the web for pretty much anything these days, but coping with the amount of results that come back can be a challenge.

Being able to handle information efficiently is a skill which will stand you in good stead, both for study and in the workplace. In this activity we are going to focus on one aspect of dealing with information overload: filtering search results quickly.

#### Learning outcome

By the end of the activity you should have developed some strategies for filtering your results when searching the web.

### 2: Filtering search results

What do we mean by filtering?

When you put the words filtering search results into Google you will most likely get a list of results relating to the ways different search engines can help you do this through their interfaces. Search engine functionality can be a useful tool, but human input is required too. Filtering is also a mental process, involving skim-reading, evaluation and a series of quick judgements about what to do next.

On the next page you will be reading a transcript of a short video on initial filtering of search results. As you read through it, reflect on your own strategies for dealing with large numbers of search results, and make a note of any useful new tips.

Are there things you do which are not mentioned in the transcript?

## Transcript of video 'Filtering search results'

| <b>Video</b>   | <b>Narration</b>  |
|--|---|
| Screen shot of Google search engine, using search term 'filtering search results'  | In this short video we are going to look at the search results screen from the screenshot on the previous page. This search, on filtering search results, brings back over 60,000,000 results, which is clearly far too many.<br><br>What can we see at a glance? |
| User scrolls down to show headings of results  | Look at the headings. As well as telling you what the site is about, they often tell you something about the source of the information ...  |
| User moves cursor to point to Google Mobile help and Facebook entries  | ... for example, Google Mobile Help or Facebook. Some of these are quite technical, and can be ruled out straight away.   |
| User scrolls up slightly to show the top of the list of results, and the cursor runs over some highlighted words in the search results | You will notice your search terms are highlighted in the brief description for each result. This will help you get an idea of the context in which these words occur.   |
| Cursor points to the URLs for a few of the search result entries   | The URL can help you decide whether to look further. Is it from a commercial company like a search engine, or from an online source which might have a more objective view, such as a university or an online publication?  |

| <b>Video</b>  | <b>Narration</b>  |
|---|---|
| The cursor points to the date of the first search result  | The date, where shown, also gives you a clue. Search engines are continuously developing and changing, so it is important to have the most up-to-date information.  |
| User scrolls to the top of the page to show the search box  | <p>When I ran this search I was looking for something on how people can deal with large numbers of search results quickly, but in fact most of the results on the first screen are about the technical features of search engines. This is of some interest, but not the main focus of my enquiry.</p> <p>What might my next step be?</p>     |
| User enters inverted commas before and after terms in the search box  | <p>I could do a phrase search. This is where I enclose my search words in inverted commas. As you can see, it cuts down the number of results considerably.</p> <p>I could go to the next screen and see if there is anything relevant there.</p>   |
| <p>User scrolls down the screen and selects the 'More search tools' option in left-hand navigation bar</p> <p>User clicks on 'Past month'</p> | I could also cut down the volume of results by limiting by date. To do that I select 'More search tools' in the left-hand column, and then the relevant time period, for example 'Past month'. This brings down the number of results to a much more manageable level, but it is still not guaranteed that I will find what I am looking for. |

| Video                                      | Narration  |
|--|--|
| User moves cursor to the top of the screen | <p>I could consider changing my search. Instead of filtering, I could search for "quick evaluation". When I tried this, it did offer me slightly more relevant results, but still not really what I am after.</p> <p>Perhaps what I am looking for has not been written about.</p> <p>At each stage of the process, notice how I am making a judgement. Having not found much useful after 10 minutes, I have decided to try a different approach. That might mean asking someone else in my network (for example, I use Twitter for networking with other people in my field), or rethinking my search altogether. It is important to weigh up the time spent searching, against the results found, and to know when to stop.</p> |

### 3: Try it for yourself

In this activity you have considered some techniques for quick filtering of search results. This involves not only confidence using your chosen search engine, but also human judgement.

#### Five-minute foray:

The following exercise will give you a chance to try this out for yourself.

Choose a topic that interests you.

Before you start searching, decide what sort of information will meet your needs.

Also note what time it is, as the aim is to spend no longer than 5 minutes on this.

Go to the [Google search engine](#) (or open your search engine of choice) and carry out your search.

How many results did you get? Take a look at the list. What sort of results have come up on the first page? Are there any which are especially relevant? Look at heading, highlighted keywords, type of site, URL and date.

What is your next step? For example, do you want to narrow by type of information or date range, add more search words, or check out what other people thought about a particular site?

If you have time, try out one of these options. Reflect on how successful your strategy was.

Make a shortlist of one or two sites you would want to return to, by adding them to favourites / bookmarks or whatever method is most convenient for you.

How long did it take you?

## **References**

### **Being digital activity**

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