

# Being digital

## Search slips and tips

### 1: Introduction

Searching online doesn't always produce the results you are expecting. The way you search will determine how successful you are at finding what you need.

There are some common pitfalls to searching online that you can avoid, if you think carefully about what it is you need and the approach you plan to take.

### Learning outcome

By the end of this activity you should be able to avoid the pitfalls of searching for information online, and be able to conduct more efficient searches.

### 2: Where did they go wrong?

In this section you will be considering three case studies. They provide an insight into the kinds of problems people face when they are searching for information online.

The case studies show how Ruth, Michael and Jenny were unsuccessful in searching for the information they needed. Read about their experiences, and try to pinpoint where they may have gone wrong. Also think about how they might have improved the ways they conducted their searches.

Do you think there are any key points that sum up what went wrong? What tips would you give to help them to search more effectively next time?

As you read, you might like to make a few quick notes on your thoughts and ideas.

## **Ruth**

Ruth is planning her holiday to New Zealand. She has just booked her flight, but is a bit concerned about Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT). She's heard that there are socks available on the market that can reduce the risks associated with DVT.

Ruth would now like to find out more about the socks, to help her decide whether to buy a pair. She searches for 'DVT socks' on Google and finds pages of results.

Looking through the results, Ruth is dismayed that most of them are online shops that sell the socks, but don't explain how they would help. Others contain very general information. From what she can see, there appears to be very little trustworthy information on the pros and cons of using the socks.

## **Michael**

Michael works for a security company. He's been asked to compile a report for his boss on the pros and cons of ID cards.

The deadline for the report is tomorrow, so he only has a day to write it. His knowledge on ID cards is limited, so he realises that he will need to find some reliable information that he can quote in the report.

Michael spends all morning looking for information. At first, he does find some websites that he finds interesting. However, by lunchtime, he realises that he hasn't found anything that will help him with his report.

The deadline is looming and he is now both frustrated and concerned that he will not finish the report in time.

## **Jenny**

Jenny is going on holiday to Puglia next week. She's heard that there are some fantastic beaches in the area, and is really looking forward to visiting them. She decides to search online for information about the best beaches and where to find them.

Jenny uses the search term 'Apulia', which is a synonym for Puglia. She then tweaks her search several times using the advanced search options. This is because she wants to exclude results from commercial companies offering villa holidays.

Jenny finds snippets of information on good beaches, but just can't find the exact type of site she has in mind. This leaves her feeling very frustrated.

### **3: What would you advise?**

Having now read the three case studies, you will have noticed that some of our searchers obviously had a plan of sorts in mind at the start, but it didn't always get them the results they wanted.

Read through the feedback for each case study below. They highlight what might have gone wrong with the searches, and how each person's techniques for searching could have been improved.

Compare these suggestions with your own notes or views.

### **Feedback for Ruth**

Ruth simply typed in the first few words that sprang to mind, without thinking exactly what she was looking for. For example:

- Did she want to buy DVT socks?
- Was she conducting research into DVT socks?
- Did she want to find out the pros and cons of DVT socks?

The search results don't match up well with her original 'need', but she doesn't think to go back and alter her search.

Looking at the results of less successful searches usually helps to clarify what it is you are actually looking for.

Ruth would have been more effective if she had spent some time thinking carefully about what kind of information she was actually hoping to find.

If she had given some thought to the keywords she was going to use for her search, she would have avoided the false start, and saved time. She could have included more targeted keywords, for example 'health', 'advice', or 'pros and cons'.

## **Feedback for Michael**

It is possible that Michael may have been side-tracked when searching for the information he needed.

He would have benefited from putting together a search plan, no matter how vague. This would have kept him on track, given that he was search for something specific, with only a limited amount of time available.

Michael could have referred back to his original search aim to help him focus. He could also have asked for advice from colleagues, or contacts he has online.

If you have plenty of time, getting side-tracked can provide the opportunity to broaden your search horizon. It may highlight that your original expectations were too narrow, or not as relevant as you initially thought.

If you're up against a deadline:

- set a time limit
- stick to your broad search plan
- keep tabs on what you have already covered, for example the searches you've carried out
- know when to call it a day.

## Feedback for Jenny

Jenny does everything she can to ensure the 'perfect' search. She chooses the right keywords and synonyms. She also uses an appropriate source, tweaking her search as she goes along and using the advanced search options. However, she still can't find what she is looking for.

Unfortunately, search tools and the content of the web are imperfect, even if you do hit on the 'perfect' search. Sometimes you may have to accept that the information you find will just have to do.

Jenny probably did have enough of the right sort of information, with the little snippets she'd gleaned. She could have combined information from the different sources she had found. If she wanted to continue her search, she might have tried to use an alternative search strategy.

## 4: Summary

Maybe the search slips made by Ruth, Michael and Jenny are familiar to you. The examples highlight some of the pitfalls that can occur when you search online, even if you do have a plan.

In the case of Ruth, the problem was in defining the scope of her search query. Michael lost focus at the start of his search and went off track early on. Jenny was doggedly determined to find exactly the sort of resource she had in mind at the start, and may perhaps have benefited from trying an alternative search strategy.

## Hints and tips

When searching for information online:

- pause to consider what it is you are really looking for
- look in the right place, and consider other options
- choose the right keywords and subtract the redundant words from a question
- beware of being side-tracked
- know when to stop.

## **Next steps**

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

## **References**

### **Being digital activity**

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