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# Meta-Search Engines

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## Contents of this page:

- **What are "Meta-Search" Engines? How do they work?**
- **Recommended Meta-Searchers**
- **Limitations of Meta-Search Engines**
- **A word on "Portals"**
- **TABLE: Features of Some Meta-Searchers to Consider**
- **About this table (criteria for selection)**

# What are "meta-search" engines?

**In a meta-search engine,** you submit keywords in its search box, and it transmits your search simultaneously to several individual search engines and their databases of web pages. Within a few seconds, you get back **results from all the search engines queried.** Meta-search engines do not own a database of Web pages; they send your search terms to the databases maintainted for other search engines.

In ordinary (non-"meta") search engines such as Northern Light, AltaVista, Google, etc., you submit keywords to their individual database of web-pages, and you get back a different display of documents from each search engine. Results from submitting very comparable searches can differ widely (about 40%), but also contain some of the same sites (about 60%).

Some meta-search engine sites offer many useful secondary, portal-like services and specialized collections of web-sites and/or resources for businesses, web designers, movie-goers, etc. Others offer what I call "pseudo-meta-searching" -- a collection of search boxes for different search engines or a drop-down menu that let's you choose which one among a list of search engines to search. Neither of these types of services is commented on here. Pseudo-meta-searchers are, in fact, excluded from the table below (see criteria), because they resemble collections of searchable databases more than meta-searchers.

## Meta-Searchers We Recommend

The best free downloadable meta-search tool we've seen is Copernic, especially because of its many customizable features and ability to refine (search within results using Boolean operators). It is easy to download and install, and you do not need to buy their other products. For serious searching using a single meta-searcher, Copernic is hard to beat. It has extensive help. It requires Internet Explorer and a little patience learning how to get the most out of it.

Based on where they search, ease of use, ability to focus, capacity to handle more advanced searches intelligently (e.g. by translating or carefully routing Boolean operators), some meta-search tools stand out as superior. For the general purpose, freely accessible engines, we prefer Ixquick and Metacrawler. The $29.95 downloadable version of WebFerret is also good.

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## Limitations of Meta-Search engines

**How do you know if your search terms will "work"?** As anyone who does Internet searching knows, search protocol (the way you enter search keywords) is far from standardized. Almost all accept " " as causing a phrase. A few accept Boolean AND, OR, and NOT. Fewer accept ( ) to group terms. Some only accept + or -. Some default to OR, some to AND. Some take * to truncate. Other stem automatically. And so on.

**Three main factors determine the usefulness** of any meta-search engine (see Table below):
1. The search engines they send your search terms to (size, content, number of search engines, you ability to choose the search engines you prefer); all of them search subject directories as well as search engines and intermix results from all.
2. How they handle your search terms and search syntax (Boolean operators, phrases, and defaults they impose);
3. How they display results (ranking; aggregated into one list, or with each search engine's results reported separately)

**Good for simple searches.** In this tutorial, we recommend strongly that you tailor your search approach to the kind of information you want to find. Meta-Search engines are useful if you are looking for a unique term or phrase (enclose phrases in quotes " "); or if you simply want to test run a couple of keywords to see if they get what you want. For such straight-forward searches, the unique ranking algorithm used by **Google** (based on how many other sites link to a site) often finds exactly what you want, better than any meta-search engine (unless you choose one you can limit to Google only).

**For more difficult searches,** we recommend a search engine where you can search within results on a term or phrase you specify. We recommend learning Alta Vista

Advanced Search and Northern Light Power Search and possibly Infoseek whenever you retrieve a huge result and want to focus on some aspect. some other approach. Please consult our recommended search strategy based on what you know and want to know. You will learn when to consult Subject Directories, how to look for expert guides and specialized databases -- all of which have a valuable place in the repertoire of searching skills for the experienced searcher.

**Use meta-search engines -- but use them CAUTIOUSLY:**

- Most meta-search engines only spend a short time in each database and often retrieve only 10% of any of the results in any of the databases queried. This makes their searches usually "quick and dirty," but often good enough to find what you want.

- Most meta-searchers simply pass your search terms along, and if your search contains more than one or two words or very complex logic, most of that will be lost. It will only make sense to the few search engines that support such logic (see table of general search engine features).

- Quantity in results does not equal satisfaction. If you get more results than you want, try refining the results by going directly to AltaVista Advanced Search, Northern Light, or Infoseek by clicking on their link in the results. Choose meta-search engines that offer some of these as options.

- Look for meta-search engines that also send your terms to selective or odd databases like WebCrawler, Thunderstone, Direct Hit, and WhatUSeek. One of the advantages of a meta-searcher is that you might overlook databases like these which may have sites missed by the big boys.

# A word on Portals

The trend is for many search sites to offer not only searching and links to resources by subject, but also many other services (stock quotes, airline tickets, shopping malls, news links, games, chatrooms, free e-mail, and much more). The goal seems to be to lure as many users to the site and keep them there as long as possible, probably because the site's advertisers may benefit.

**What has this to do with meta-search engines?** Two things:

1. A growing number of meta-search engines are becoming portals, offering a lot of often distracting other services and variations of searching.

2. There is at least one site -- the **Abyan Super Gateway** -- that allows you to create your own, personalized portal. This is not a bad idea if you do a lot of searching and/or have specialized interests. You can organize your favorite search engines, meta-search engines, sites, links to news and other resources, and more. You can link to other portals. You can become a published expert.

# TABLE: Features of Selected Meta-Search Engines

**Listed in alphabetical order.**
**For the Top Recommended choices, see above.**

**Ranked as: **** very useful, *** useful, ** limited usefulness, * entertaining**

| Meta-Search Tool | What's Searched As of date at bottom of page. They change often. | Complex Search Ability | Results Display |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Chubba** http://chubba.whatuseek.com/ *** | AltaVista, Excite, GoTo, Infoseek, Lycos, Webcrawler & 3 others (not listed on the site). | Excellent for phrases and simple searches. All searches seem to default to AND. May accept NOT. Help humorous but not very informative. | Aggregated into one list, and ranked usefully. You can "ungroup" to get the results from each search engine. |
| **Copernic** www.copernic.com **** **Seems better than WebFerret as a downloaded searcher.** | Alta Vista, AOL.com, Direct Hit, EuroSeek, Excite, Fast Search, Google, GoTo, HotBot, Infoseek, LookSmart, Lycos, Magellan, MSN Web, Netscape Netcenter, Open Directory, Snap, Web Crawler, Yahoo! (can select in Settings). Also international collections of search engines. | ALL, ANY, Phrase, and more. Also Boolean searching within results under Refine (powerful!). Extensive help under Help menu. Integrated with Internet Explorer (not Netscape). | Must be downloaded and installed, but free of charge. Many advanced features, can change results display, tracks previous searches. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Dogpile**<br>www.dogpile.com<br>*** only if customized<br>* if used with defaults | Default is (in this order) LookSmart, GoTo.com, Dogpile Web Catalog, Dogpile Open Directory, Direct Hit, About.com, InfoSeek, Real Names, AltaVista, Lycos, and Yahoo! and more. Changes frequently. | Can include Booleans and parentheses and " ", but they will be removed when search is sent where they are not accepted. The results can be VERY inconsistent, especially from some of the smaller sources, which are NOT search engines, but subject directories. | We recommend you Customize Dogpile to send it to Google, Infoseek, and AltaVista first. Results are retrieve in lists of 10 hits from each engine queried. Not aggregated into one list. |
| **Highway61**<br>www.highway61.com<br>* humorous format and help | Excite, Lycos, Infoseek, WebCrawler, and Yahoo! | Always ORs unless you specify AND, and seems inconsistent. | Aggregated into one list, based on rankings in search engines where found. |
| **InferenceFind**<br>www.infind.com<br>** | WebCrawler, Yahoo, Lycos, Alta Vista, InfoSeek, and Excite. | Passes quotations and Boolean operators through, untranslated, with mixed results. | Groups results in categories of different types, varying with content of results. Eliminates duplicates. Results hard to |

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|---|---|---|---|
| | | | evaluate. Shows page titles only. No URL, text, or other clue. |
| **InfoSearch2000**<br>www.infosearch2000.com<br>Not even * | AltaVista, Excite, GoTo.Com, Hotbot, InfoSeek, LookSmart, Lycos, Northern Light, Snap!, Yahoo Categories, Yahoo Web Pages | Use only simple searches. | Provides results from each search engine separately. Many results not well ranked. Does not aggregate, cannot be customized. |
| **Ixquick**<br>www.ixquick.com<br>****<br>**Tied** **for best** in this list | AOL, Live Directory, AltaVista, LookSmart, Excite, Lycos, MSN, FastSearch, GoTo, Snap, Hotbot, WebCrawler, Infoseek, Yahoo! | Translates your search into each search engine's syntax. Supports all forms of Booleans and phrases, wildcards, parentheses, and other modifiers such as NEAR, because Ixquick knows which search engines can cope with which complex searches. | Brings "top 10" from each search engine, and aggregates results. Also uses and reports ranking in each site. Eliminates duplicates. VERY sensible alternative to Google for most searches. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **MetaCrawler**<br>www.metacrawler.com<br>**\*\*\*\***<br>**Tied** **for best** in this list. | AltaVista, Infoseek, WebCrawler, Thunderstone, Excite, Google, Lycos, LookSmart, GoTo, About.com, DirectHit, RealNames. | Select "ALL" for most searches. Also lists pages with some of your terms (further down). Also accepts + to require, and - to exclude. Does not Boolean AND, OR, or NOT or ( ). | Aggregates results based on "vote" of individual sites. Can customize or use Power Search to specify which search engines to use and other parameters. |
| **ProFusion**<br>www.profusion.com<br>**\*\*\*** | AltaVista, InfoSeek, LookSmart, Excite, Magellan, WebCrawler, GoTo, AllTheWeb/FastSearch, Yahoo! Can customize what is searched ("You choose"). Default is "best 3" - which varies. | Offers "simple", ALL terms, ANY terms, Boolean searches (with AND, OR, NOT, NEAR and ( ) and modifies search to work everywhere). Must capitalize Boolean operators. | Aggregates results into one ranked list. Does not eliminate duplicates (despite its claim to). Can suppress summaries. Can have links checked. |

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| **SearchCaddy**<br>www.searchcaddy.com<br>✲✲✲ | Chooses 6 among: AllTheWeb/FastSearch, AltaVista, DirectHit, Infoseek, LookSmart, Northern Light, Webcrawler, Yahoo!. Can customize at bottom of results, or by clicking Simultaneously and going down to the Meta-Search section (upper part is not a true meta-search). | Default is ALL terms. Accepts "" for phrases, and * to truncate. Use Boolean AND, OR, ANDNOT (yes, no space). Capitals not required. No ( ). May not translate searches for each search engine. Hard to locate help. | Aggregates results in one ranked list. Does not eliminate duplicates. Opens new windows frequently. Many interfaces specialized for different topics. |
| **Seek123**<br>www.seek123.com<br>✲✲ | AltaVista, Excite, HotBot, Infoseek, Lycos, Webcrawler, Yahoo! as true meta-search. Others searched one at a time. Possibly useful gateway to many search engines internationally. | Accepts + to require and - to exclude. Default is whatever the default at each search engine is. | Does not aggregate. Reports each search engine's results. |
| **WebFerret**<br>http://www.ferretsoft.com/netferret/<br>**Free version** ✲✲<br>**$26.96 version**✲✲✲✲ | Free: AltaVista, AOL, Euroseek, Excite, GoTo, Infoseek, LookSmart, Lycos, Yahoo!<br>$26.96: All these + about 20 more, including Northern Light, Google, and an array of European search engines. Fully customizable. Can turn off advertisements. | Specify Boolean, ALL, ANY, or Phrase. Not clear how much translating for complex searches. Faster than many. Also specialized versions for auctions, chat, ftp, and more. | Download, and put an icon on your desktop. Can have duplicates sites or titles merged. Can request "abstracts" or summaries. |

**About this table (criteria for selection)**

I [welcome](#) and receive many [suggestions](#) of meta-search engines to include in this page. Those included must be free, must simultaneously query several search engines from a single search box, and must offer at least one interface of potential usefulness in general searchng (not subject focused).

There are many search-bots for special purposes, and I suggest the [BotSpot](#) as a locus to learn about them.

[Return to top of this page](#)

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| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | • [About WWW, Internet, Netscape](#)<br>• [About Search Tools](#)<br>• [Recommended Search Strategy](#)<br>• [Tables Comparing FIVE kinds of Search Tools](#)<br>• [Evaluating Web Pages:Why and How](#) | **Detailed Search Engine Instructions:**<br>• [Google](#)<br>• [Alta Vista Advanced Search](#)<br>• [Northern Light](#)<br>• [FastSearch](#) | |
| | [Return to the Tutorial Table of Contents](#) | [GLOSSARY of jargon we use](#) | |

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