

# Online Journeys

by Daniel Tobias

## Looking for Stuff in All the Right Places

The huge and expanding number of sites in the Internet leaves many people feeling lost when they want to find something specific. Search engines and site directories are useful tools in locating what you want. They come in three basic flavors: Robot-generated search engines, human-maintained global indexes, and topic-specific link sites.

Robot-generated search engines are created by programs that are constantly wandering the web to find and index sites. They generate an index using the full text of every page, so they're pretty comprehensive, but may be flooded with junk because they don't know the difference between good sites and bad. Some popular robotic search engines are Alta Vista ([altavista.digital.com](http://altavista.digital.com)), HotBot ([www.hotbot.com](http://www.hotbot.com)) and Excite ([www.excite.com](http://www.excite.com)). The user interface is very simple: just type in a word, phrase, or list of words you're looking for, and the search engine will come up with a list of sites that contain the words you typed. Try to be specific; a very general word like "flowers" will get everything from gardening tips to news items about Bill Clinton's old flame Gennifer, but "Shreveport Florist" will give a more targeted result if what you're looking for is a place to buy flowers in Shreveport. But if you're *too* specific you may not find anything, so you need to make a good balance.

If you can't seem to find what you want among all the junk turned up by a robot search engine (which may give you 100 different pages from the same site if they all have the keywords you're searching for in them), you might try the much more manageable list in a human-maintained index. Yahoo ([www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com)) is the biggest and most popular of this type. Its staff takes submissions from webmasters all over the world and makes editorial decisions on whether to add them, and if so in what category. The categories are arranged in a logical, hierarchical way so you can browse your way from the front page down to a site of interest, or you can type a search word just like in a robotic search engine. You'll get fewer results than the robot engines, but they're more likely to be relevant and useful.

Topic-specific link sites are great if you're looking for a site in a particular specialty that has an index particularly for it. These subject-specific indexes are organized in a manner appropriate to the topic at hand, and have more comprehensive sets of links than the general indexes would have, often accompanied by other information. Here are a few topic-specific link sites:

The Ultimate Band List ([www.ubl.com](http://www.ubl.com)) -- musical artists and groups, and other music sites  
Ultimate TV ([www.ultimatetv.com](http://www.ultimatetv.com)) -- TV shows, stations, and networks; TV news and listings  
The Internet Movie Database ([www.moviedatabase.com](http://www.moviedatabase.com)) -- info/links on every movie ever made  
City.Net ([www.city.net](http://www.city.net)) -- sites with information about cities, countries, and regions  
My Virtual Reference Desk ([www.refdesk.com](http://www.refdesk.com)) -- reference sites: dictionaries, atlases, etc.  
Great Outdoor Recreation Pages ([www.gorp.com](http://www.gorp.com)) -- Hiking, fishing, camping  
CollegeNet ([www.collegenet.com](http://www.collegenet.com)) -- Colleges and universities

If you're just looking for a good place to start exploring the net, we've got one of our own: LinkCenter, at [www.linkcenter.com](http://www.linkcenter.com), has a collection of useful and interesting links grouped by subject, including a page with links and search forms for most of the major search engines.

## Feedback Tips

Webmasters generally want and appreciate your comments regarding their web sites. That's why most web sites include either a "mailto" link, a feedback page, or both. Positive comments like "Your site is great! It's just what I've always been looking for!" are a nice ego boost, but constructive criticism is also useful, such as pointing out links that don't work or color schemes that are unreadable on your monitor. If

you have any suggestions of additional links or resources the author could include that are relevant to the topic at hand, that is always appreciated.

However, it is important to note that many webmasters maintain multiple sites, and some sites are large and complex. Hence, you should be sure to be very specific about what it is you're commenting on. In my webmaster role, I get lots of e-mail of this sort:

**From:** jdoe@somewhere.net

**To:** webmaster@softdisk.com

**Subject:** Your web site

Your site is the best presentation of its subject matter that I've ever seen!

Congratulations! However, the link at the bottom to somebody else's site with more info got a "404 Not Found" error when I tried it, so you should check it out.

--John Doe

The problem is that I have no idea what web site he's responding to; is it the Softdisk site, the Shreveport/Bossier site, my personal web site, or a client site I maintain? And what specific page or article within that site are they talking about? You shouldn't assume the recipient only maintains a single page and knows right away what you're talking about. It's better to start your message with a brief mention of what page you mean: "The November newsletter of the Bird Study Group..." "The debate over school prayer in the Shreveport Humanists site...", "The Screen Saver Studio technical specifications page...", etc. Maybe you can cut-and-paste the URL (web address, like <http://www.softdisk.com/sub/windows/>) from your browser to eliminate all ambiguity.

(Contact Daniel Tobias at [dan@softdisk.com](mailto:dan@softdisk.com). My personal World Wide Web page is at <http://www.softdisk.com/comp/dan/>.)