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Evaluation of information retrieval systems is based on recall and precision. Recall is defined as how many of the pertinent documents were retrieved (quantity). For example, if 50 documents exist and 20 were found, recall is 20 out of 50. Precision is how many documents are relevant (cleanliness). For example, if 100 documents were retrieved and only 20 are relevant, precision is 20 percent. The relationship between precision and recall is usually inversely proportional.

The idea that more is better is not true. A small number of results with high precision is the best outcome. A search engine is an information retrieval system. Most are web based like Google and Yahoo.

Search engines have three parts: the spider or crawler- finds documents and breaks them into words to put into the Index, and the third part is the ranker which can be defined as a set of decisions used to weight the documents and decide which to display

first. Different search engines divide the documents differently, construct the index differently, and use a different set of weighting decisions.

Some search engines are tag based. Instead of actually searching the documents, they search tags that have key terms relating to the documents. Relevance depends very much on the user and thus cannot be really measured. Utility is a better term for it. Testing must be performed in an authentic setting because relevance is a necessary measure.