Bibliographic retrieval tools exist due to the need to retrieve organized resources about a specific set of information, materials, or knowledge. These tools allow for a systematic way to pull together collections, and aid in compiling resources based on the records that represent the individual materials (information held, physical material, etc.) within that collection.

Retrieval tools and their organized information help users understand what is held in the institution they are searching (library, museum, archives, company records, databases, etc.). These tools save time, as well as group like things together. To be effective, retrieval tools must provide enough information so the retriever can search and receive results that are relevant and useful. The results should provide a list of resources and the sources that contain this information, and may provide the physical location of the items. The tools should be fairly easy to search, and provide consistent results. Information should be able to be searched based on author, title, subject, or format – either individually or in a combination of any of these. An example could be a listing of all books ever written by the author Stephen King (including those written under a different name), or all resources relating to colon cancer in men over fifty that are in a particular library. Bibliographies, catalogs, indexes, finding aids, registers, and search engines are all types of retrieval tools.

Bibliographies are lists of information resources. These resources are not usually physically located in one place. The resources are uniformly formatted. The bibliography usually only has one access point – i.e.: author or title, but not both. Bibliographies are useful for research, as they bring together a list of sources based on subject matter, on author, or by date. Bibliographies can be annotated; having a brief description or synopsis of the resource. A pathfinder is a bibliography that is specific to one institution, perhaps a listing of all books by Stephen King within your own public library.
Catalogs contain all items or resources within a collection – an inventory of resources. They are useful to know what is available within an institution, and where the items can be located. The resource description is usually longer than that of a bibliography. Searching is available at more than one access point - i.e.: author, title, subject, or any combination of these. Catalogs also show what is available in that institution on a given topic or author.

An index as a retrieval tool is different than the index in the back of a book. The index in the back of the book is a useful tool prepared only at the time of the publication of the book, however is extremely helpful in retrieving information within the text of the book. Indexes that are considered retrieval tools are separately published (separate from the information resources being analyzed) and are most often organized by topic or subject. An index does not reflect resources within a single institution. As indexes are primarily created by for-profit institutions, there is not uniformity or standardization between different indexes. Indexes are useful tools for finding articles in journals, poems within collections, or as purchasing guides for materials.

Finding aids are used in archival collections. They are an inventory of collections of items, rather than a listing of individual items. The finding aid describes a collection, including the physical condition, provenance (original owner(s)), a narrative of the nature of the collection (including access points), how the collection is arranged or organized, and where it is located; including restrictions and handling information.

Registers are primarily used by museums. It is similar to a catalog, but includes additional access points - donor, insurance information, and provenance. The register is created based on each museum’s specific needs. Museums may also use public access databases that can
be searched by artist, title, type of work, etc. The public may be able to view photographs and receive information of the criteria searched.

Search engines are retrieval tools designed for computers. They were developed to allow searching by phrases or keywords within full text documents. Depending on where you begin your search on the web (Google, OCLC, Medline, an individual company site), you will get varied results. Each site is not consistent in their searching methods. Access point can vary; indexed information may come from a wide-variety of sources, and relevance of display results vary. Some site may contain directories that allow users to find topics organized by subject. Directories within a search engine may also be used, but again, the categories vary from site to site, and may be more cumbersome to use (as you have to drill down into the topic), versus just searching via the search engine. Search engines can be very useful if you need a lot of information on a given topic, however the authority of the source may be unknown. Specific information may be found using search engines on web sites related to that topic, but then you are limited to that site’s indexing. The web also does not contain older sources, which may be necessary when doing research.

Depending on your needs, a paper format may be just as useful as an electronic format. Some people find it easier to carry a bibliography with them to find materials, or holding a finding guide as you sort through archives. However, paper formats are harder to maintain and update frequently. You are confined to that set of results – cannot search outside the scope of the resources and dates of the results. Most people are now comfortable with the web, and prefer to use search engines and on-line catalogs. However, electronic versions may give too much information, and the resources may not be known, or reputable. Nevertheless, they are usually current, fairly easy to use, and may also include hyper-links to additional information and
resources. The cost of paper vs. electronic is debatable, because what you save in paper and manual typing and compilation, may be offset by the additional costs of programmers and data entry employees.

Bibliographic retrieval tools are beneficial to users, as they provide information for all types of resources organized by author, title, and subject. A searcher should be able to find resources on known criteria, as well as resources based on a given author or topic. Retrieval tools are essential in providing a systematic way to organize and access records that represent as much of the world’s information and knowledge as possible.