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The difference between semantic search and agentic search

With the rise of LLMs and generative search use cases, many brands use the terms semantic search and agentic search interchangeably. While both rely on AI and language understanding, they solve different problems and operate at different layers of the search experience.

Explore what these searches do and how they work.

Definition

Semantic search understands what users mean

Semantic uses machine learning (ML) and natural language processing (NLP) to retrieve information that matches meaning rather than characters.

Think of it as **keyword search** on steroids.

Agentic search understands why users are asking

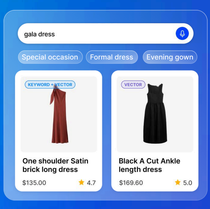
Agentic search uses an AI agent to interpret a complex query, divide it into subtasks, and initiate the actions required to retrieve the most appropriate results.

Think of it as **rules-based search** on steroids.

How they work

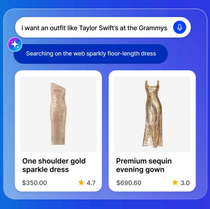
Semantic search uses vector embeddings, a string of numbers representing the features of a specific datapoint. The more similar datapoints are in reality, the more similar their positions will be on a vector.

If you're searching for something to wear to a gala, **"evening gown"** and **"formal dress"** will be near each other on a vector.



Agentic search uses a large language model (LLM) as a reasoning layer to break large tasks into simpler actions. The AI agent can rewrite queries, add structure, and call search engines.

If you ask **"show me an outfit like Taylor Swift's at the Grammys,"** the AI agent will map the query to **"sparkly floor-length dress"** then call a search with the refined query.



The benefits

Semantic search

- Finds the right products even when the exact words aren't used
- Gives consistent, **reliable results**
- Keeps the experience fast

Agentic Search

- Understands complex, multi-part queries
- **Applies judgement, logic and decision-making**
- Refines its own process during operation

The caveats

Semantic search

- Needs well-structured data to produce good results
- Does not execute multi-step requests
- **Deterministic:** the same query always produces the same results in the same order

Agentic Search

- Can be slower and/or costlier
- Must seamlessly orchestrate multiple systems
- **Harder to A/B test**

A solid partnership

Luckily, search isn't an either/or situation: semantic search and agentic search work together. Each occupies a different layer of the search experience. Together, they make search more **adaptive, intelligent, and natural.**

Discover how Algolia's AI-powered search solutions can benefit you.

Request a demo to learn more