

## Top Search Tips

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At the end of our internet search workshops, participants are asked to come up with a collective top search tips. These can be search tools, individual web sites or search techniques. This is a compilation of the tips from several workshops over the past year.

### 1. It isn't your fault!

You run your search a second time in Google and you get a completely different set of results, despite having run the same search a mere 20 minutes before. Or you run a site search in Google but the results come from here, there and everywhere. Or your results bear no resemblance whatsoever to your search strategy. Don't worry - it isn't you. Google results are rarely consistent or reproducible from one moment to the next. If you are having serious difficulties getting any sense out of Google, don't struggle. Try another search engine (<http://search.yahoo.co.uk>), Live (<http://www.live.com/>), MSE360 (<http://www.mse360.com/>), Exalead (<http://www.exalead.co.uk/>)

### 2. Google

Tip 1 highlighted some of the problems with Google but it can still deliver the goods a lot of the time, and it is still the first port of call for most of us. Make sure, though, that you are using the advanced search features to the full and that you are using the right part of Google, for example News for current headlines, Images, Blogsearch etc.

3. **Use the Advanced Search screen.** There are lots of goodies to be found on the advanced search screens: options for focussing your search by file format (e.g. xls for data and statistics, ppt for expert presentations, pdf for industry or government reports); site and domain search to limit your search to just one web site or a type of organisation (e.g. UK government, US academic); and in Google there is a numeric range search.

4. **Google Custom Search Engines (Google CSE)** at <http://www.google.com/coop/cse/>. Ideal for building collections of sites that you regularly search, to create a searchable subject list, or to offer your users a more focused search option.

### 5. See what Google does with your search string.

a) If you use the default search box and Google comes back with odd results, click on Advanced Search to see what it has done with your search terms.

b) If you use the Advanced Search screen and fill in the boxes, see how Google formats the search strategy by looking the search box at the top of the results page. By learning the commands and prefixes you can build more specific searches on the default search page.

6. Use <http://ranking.thumbshots.com/> to compare the first hundred results of two search engines (for example Yahoo vs Google, Google vs Live.com). This will show the degree of overlap, or lack of it. Very useful when trying to convince a colleague or student that they should use more than one search tool.

7. Try out **Exalead** (<http://www.exalead.com/>) for its phonetic, approximate spelling search, wild cards, truncation, and NEAR proximity operator.

8. Should you be using Google and similar search engines at all? Look at an evaluated listing such as Intute (<http://www.intute.ac.uk/>) for a wide range of quality subject resources or Alacrawiki (<http://www.alacrawiki.com/>) for business information. Think 'type of information', for example for sources of statistics try Nationmaster (<http://www.nationmaster.com>) or OFFSTATS ([www.offstats.auckland.ac.nz](http://www.offstats.auckland.ac.nz)). Use the structured and indexed databases that you already have in your organisation.

9. Use the **Wayback Machine** (<http://www.archive.org/>) to see what was being said on a web site in the past or to track down "lost" documents and pages.
10. Remember that you are searching an **out of date index** of the web when you are using Google et al. Google is the least up to date: Windows Live (<http://www.live.com/>) seems to be the most frequently updated.
11. **Blogs** aren't always nerdish! There are some good authoritative blogs and **RSS feeds** on a wide range of subjects. Search on Google Blogsearch (<http://www.google.com/blogsearch>), Blogs & Feeds in <http://www.ask.com/>, [Technorati.com](http://www.technorati.com), [Blogpulse.com](http://www.blogpulse.com),
12. **Cached copies.** Look at the search engines cached copy of a web page if you can't find your search terms in the document, or if the page is nothing like the description in the results list. You will see the version of the page that has been used by the search engine for indexing and with your terms highlighted.
13. Use tools such as Browsys Powersearch (<http://www.browsys.com/powersearch/>) and Zuula (<http://www.zuula.com/>) for quick and easy access to a wide range of search tools covering different types of information. Enter your search once, click on the tab for the type of resource for which you are searching (video, images, reference, news etc.), and then work your way through the list of search engines.
14. **Repeat the most important term** or terms in your search one or more times. For example 'beer market share France Belgium Czech' and 'beer market share France Belgium Czech Czech Czech' give different results. Works in Google, Yahoo, Live, MSE360, and Exalead.
15. **Enter your search terms in a different order.** The search engines will rank and present your results differently
16. If your search involves numbers, distances, weights, prices or measurements of any sort use the **numeric range** search in Google. For example: toblerone 1..5 kg to find online shops selling large(!) bars of toblerone.
17. Make use of **proximity searching**.
  - a) Double quote marks around your search terms to force a phrase search works in all of the search engines. For example "carbon emissions trading"
  - b) In Google, use the asterisk (\*) to find your terms separated by one or more terms but close to one another. There is no information in the help files on the maximum separation. Increasing the number of asterisks is not supposed to make a difference but it does and it appears that one asterisk stands in for one word.
  - c) The Exalead NEAR command finds words within a maximum of 16 terms within each other. You can control the degree of separation by using NEAR/n where 'n' is a number specified by you. For example climate NEAR/3 change
18. **Social bookmarking sites.** Try social bookmarking sites, not only for creating your evaluated lists of sites but for searching other peoples. For example **FURL** (<http://www.furl.net/>), **Del.icio.us** (<http://del.icio.us/>), **Connotea** (<http://www.connotea.org/>), **2Collab** (<http://www.2collab.com/>). Connotea (owned by the Nature Publishing Group) and 2Collab (owned by Elsevier) are aimed at researchers and scientists.
19. **Partially answer your question** in your search. For example "A hippopotamus can run at"
20. Try good old fashioned **Boolean**. Live, Exalead and MSE360 support AND, OR, NOT and 'nested' searches, but don't go overboard. Remember to type in the operators as capital letters, otherwise the search engines will ignore them as stop words.