

10 Tips for Smarter, More Efficient Internet Searching

Google has been fanatical about speed. There is little doubt that it has built an incredibly fast and thorough search engine. Unfortunately, the human element of the Internet search equation is often overlooked. These 10 tips are designed to improve that human element and better your Internet search skills. (Note: All examples below refer to the Google search engine.)

1: Use unique, specific terms

It is simply amazing how many Web pages are returned when performing a search. You might guess that the terms “*blue dolphin*” are relatively specialized. A Google search of those terms returned 2,440,000 results! To reduce the number of pages returned, use *unique* terms that are *specific* to the subject you are researching.

2: Use the minus operator (-) to narrow the search

How many times have you searched for a term and had the search engine return something totally unexpected? Terms with multiple meanings can return a lot of unwanted results. The rarely used but powerful minus operator, equivalent to a Boolean NOT, can remove many unwanted results. For example, when searching for the insect caterpillar, references to the company Caterpillar, Inc. will also be returned. Use *Caterpillar -Inc* to exclude references to the company or *Caterpillar -Inc -Cat* to further refine the search.

3: Use quotation marks for exact phrases

I often remember parts of phrases I have seen on a Web page or part of a quotation I want to track down. Using quotation marks around a phrase will return only those exact words in that order. It's one of the best ways to limit the pages returned. Example: *nerds*". Of course, you must have the phrase exactly right -- and if your memory is as good as mine, that can be problematic.

4: Don't use common words and punctuation

Common terms like “*a* and *the*” are called stop words and are usually ignored. Punctuation is also typically ignored. But there are exceptions. Common words and punctuation marks *should* be used when searching for a specific phrase inside quotes. There are cases when common words like “*the*” are significant. For instance, *Raven* and *The Raven* return entirely different results.

5: Capitalization

Most search engines do not distinguish between uppercase and lowercase, even within quotation marks. The following are all equivalent:

- technology
- Technology
- TECHNOLOGY
- "technology"
- "Technology"

6: Drop the suffixes

It's usually best to enter the base word so that you don't exclude relevant pages. For example, *bird* and not *birds*, *walk* and not *walked*. One exception is if you are looking for sites that focus on the act of walking, enter the whole term *walking*.

7: Maximize AutoComplete

Ordering search terms from general to specific in the search box will display helpful results in a drop-down list and is the most efficient way to use AutoComplete. Selecting the appropriate item as it appears will save time typing. You have several choices for how the AutoComplete feature works:

Use Google AutoComplete. The standard Google start page will display a drop-down list of suggestions supplied by the Google search engine. This option can be a handy way to discover similar, related searches. For example, typing in *Tucson fast* will not only bring up the suggestion *Tucson fast food* but also *Tucson fast food coupons*. **Use browser Autocomplete.** Use this Google start page to disable the Google AutoComplete feature and display a list of *your* previous searches in a drop-down box. I find this particularly useful when I've

made dozens of searches in the past for a particular item. The browser's AutoComplete feature must be turned on for this option to work. Click one of these links for instructions detailing how to turn AutoComplete on or off in I.E. and Firefox.

Examples:

- Visual Basic statement case
- Visual Basic statement for
- Visual Basic call

8: Customize your searches

There are several other less well known ways to limit the number of results returned and reduce your search time:

- **The plus operator (+):** As mentioned above, stop words are typically ignored by the search engine. The plus operator tells the search engine to include those words in the result set. Example: tall +and short will return results that include the word *and*.
- **The tide operator (~):** Include a tilde in front of a word to return results that include synonyms. The tilde operator does not work well for all terms and sometimes not at all. A search for ~CSS includes the synonym *style* and returns fashion related style pages --not exactly what someone searching for CSS wants. Examples: ~HTML to get results for *HTML* with synonyms; ~HTML -HTML to get synonyms only for *HTML*.
- **The wildcard operator (*):** Google calls it the *fill in the blank* operator. For example, amusement * will return pages with *amusement* and any other term(s) the Google search engine deems relevant. You can't use wildcards for parts of words. So for example, *amusement p** is invalid.

9: Use browser history

Many times, I will be researching an item and scanning through dozens of pages when I suddenly remember something I had originally dismissed as being irrelevant. How do you quickly go back to that Web site? You can try to remember the exact words used for the search and then scan the results for the right site, but there is an easier way. If you can remember the general date and time of the search you can look through the browser history to find the Web page.

10: Set a time limit -- then change tactics

Sometimes, you never can find what you are looking for. Start an internal clock, and when a certain amount of time has elapsed without results, stop beating your head against the wall. It's time to try something else.

