



Google Search: Operators

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Introduction

Knowing how to utilize Google Search is powerful. Search literacy is an essential 21st century skill that will serve you in finding, organizing, and leveraging information faster and more reliably—increasing productivity and improving your quality of life online.

Digital literacy favors those who are curious, willing to experiment, and change. Google’s mission is to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful (Mission of Google). As Google’s search engine has evolved in fulfilling its mission, it has matured into a calculator, dictionary, recipe book, unit and currency converter, even a weather forecaster, translator and more! You can use it for almost anything now. By exploring and experimenting with search operators, you will become more efficient in accessing and making use of the world’s information.

Search Operators

Have you ever had a difficult experience finding what you’re looking for online? The solution is to apply “search operators.” These are terms that are used to narrow or broaden a search. By including one or more of the operators, you can gain added control over the results Google delivers.

Table 1 contains essential search operators you can employ to improve your search skills today (Search Operators, 2013):

Table 1. Google Search Operators.

Search Operators	Example	Notes
“quotes”	“To make the best better” will return different results than to make the best better	Use “quotes” to search for an exact word or phrase. This is best for literature and music, or if you’re looking for a specific word or phrase. Misemploy and you could exclude helpful results.
dash (-)	liger -site:wikipedia.org or mustang speed -car or volunteer -unitedway	Use the dash (-) to exclude unwanted words. A dash (-) before a site or word excludes all results that include that word. This can be coupled with other operators to exclude results from a specific site.
dashes (-) in between words	twelve-year-old dog and cross-reference 4-H	Dashes between words commonly indicates that words are strongly connected.
tilde (~)	~car will also search for automobile, vehicle, motorcar etc.	The tilde (~) symbol before a search term tells Google to display search results with similar words.
asterisk (*)	There are * planets in the solar system There are * 4-H Volunteers	The asterisk (*) is treated as a placeholder for 1 or more words within a query. Google fills in the blanks wherever there is an asterisk for any unknown or "wildcard" terms. Use with quotation marks to find variations of that exact phrase or to remember words in the middle of a phrase.
OR	population of utah 2012 or 2013 utah 4-H membership 2012 or 2013	To search for either of the terms use or , the results will contain pages relevant to either year. Without the or search will look for pages containing both years.
(..)	inflation 2006..2012 4-H participants 2006..2013	Entering (..) between numbers will return results for numbers in that range.

Exceptions

The rules of search have exceptions. Various deviations exist to satisfy the different ways in which people search. For instance, rather than interpret the asterisk as the "fill in the blank" operator in this query: "17 * 91" Google knows to return a calculator result. In most cases, special characters and punctuation are ignored, but as people's search habits evolve, so will Google's recognition of symbols and punctuation (Punctuation and symbols in search, 2013). Table 2 is a summary of these exceptions.

Table 2. Symbols and Punctuation in Google Search.

Symbol	Notes
underscore symbol (_)	Connects two words, such as: quick_sort. Search results will display these words either linked together (i.e., quicksort) or connected by an underscore (i.e., quick_sort).
hashtag/number sign (#)	Search for trending topics indicated by hashtags like #firstworldproblems, #CoopExt, or #CESvalue
dollar sign (\$)	Displays price - canon 900 and canon \$900 will produce different search results.
percent (%)	Search for a percent value 3% of .70 or 30% of 70
ampersand (&)	Use to find highly connected groups of words and ideas: friends & family or G&E.
plus sign (+)	Search for such things as blood type O+ or Google+ pages like +YouTube or +4-H
"at" sign (@)	Search for social tags: @4Hpro or @usuextension

Conclusion

Google Search has an incredibly deep query language with dozens of options that allow you to filter your searches. By experimenting with these search operators, you can become more efficient in accessing and making use of the world's information. Filtering information is a skill every critical thinker needs to attain in order to improve independent learning.

If you'd like to improve your search skills, consider taking the free online courses Google offers at powersearchingwithgoogle.com (Russell, 2012).

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