Google Search: Basics

Paul Hill, Nicole Jensen, Nick Read, Stacey MacArthur

Introduction

Knowing how to utilize Google Search is powerful. Search skills are an essential 21st century skill that will serve you in finding, organizing, and leveraging information faster and more reliably—thereby 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 the basics of search, you will become more efficient in accessing and making use of the world's information.

Search Basics

Google returns over 5.1 billion daily searches from people around the world. This is up from 1.7 billion in 2008 and only 60 million back in 2000 (Google Annual Search Statistics, 2013). Nearly everyone googles something everyday;however, in a recent study on student research skills, three out of four students couldn't perform a well-executed search on Google despite having grown up using the Internet and other technology (Dwyer, 2011). Effective googling is more complicated than you might imagine. The basics of Google search described in Table 1 will not only enrich your googling experience, but help you search smarter and faster (Basic Search Help, 2013):

Table 1. Google Search Basics

Search Basics	Example	Notes
Keep it simple	utah bike trails	Start by typing the name of the place, thing, or idea you're searching for.
Only the important words	Not so good: what is the story behind smokey the bear Better: smokey bear story	Enter only relevant keywords, not a full sentence or question. All the words included will be used to find matching content and too many words will limit results.
Add relevant words	First try: shoes More relevant: nike shoes Even more relevant: jordan 1 nike shoes	Add relevant words if you don't see what you want after doing a simple search. Don't worry if it takes several attempts to find the right words to describe your search.
Words a website would use	Not so good: why is my throat burning Not so great: my throat hurts Better: sore throat	The words in your search correspond with the words appearing in pages on the Internet. "Sore throat" is the term that informative web pages are more likely to use.
Employs synonyms automatically	scared of clowns will also return search results for frightened and terrified and afraid	"Quotes" around the word or phrase tells Google to match the word/phrase exactly, thus disabling this feature.
Case insensitive	Utah State Parks is the same as utah state parks	The distinction of upper-case letters is commonly ignored.
Ignores punctuation	{maker camp} or [maker camp] or (maker camp) or maker camp? are the same as maker camp	All of these are generally ignored: @ # $ % ^ & * ( ) = + [ ] ? \
Ignores spelling	iPhane is the same as iPhone Google will ask: Did you mean: ***iphone***	Google will automatically default to the most common word for your spelling.

Acts as calculator	(24*365)/(60)-9 9x+6 it's a graphing calculator too	Use Google like a calculator by typing the math problem into the search bar.
Check flight times	aa 1782 or ua 3952	Search for flight prices and flight departure and arrival using only airport codes.
Recipes	chicken carrots and noodles	Enter specific ingredients then click "Recipes" on the top panel to view recipe results.
Check local movies	star wars 84780	Find movie times at a local theater.

Exceptions

Google's search algorithms have been deliberately designed to improve the results of your search. If Google search performs differently than described in Table 1, it's because it will improve your search results. Here are three exceptions:

1. Ordinarily punctuation and special characters are disregarded, although the number of punctuation and symbols that are recognized in search is increasing (Punctuation & Symbols, 2013).

2. Filler words, such as: "a," "for", and "the," are routinely ignored unless Google determines they're essential to a search phrase. For example, the word "the" characterizes a search for the who (as in the band) and who (as in the World Health Organization).

3. It's possible that a web page could appear in your results even if it doesn't contain every word of your search. For example, the query underground old faithful will give you relevant underground images from websites that do not include the word "underground."

Conclusion

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

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

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