

Searching with Google: Tips and Techniques

What am I searching with Google?

When you use Google to search the **web** (as opposed to images, videos, scholarly information, news, etc.), you are searching only the web pages and web objects that Google has identified and indexed at a given point in time. Keep in mind that Google results will include not only web pages, but web objects such as PDF documents, PowerPoint files, Word documents, and more.

How many web pages and web objects does Google index?

Google won't say, but estimates put the number of individual web pages and web objects indexed by Google at around 20+ billion (as of 2006). That's a huge number, but...

How big is the web?

That's probably an impossible question to answer, although many have tried. In reality, Google has only identified and indexed a percentage of all web pages and web objects available. When you search Google, you are not seeing everything that is available to you on the web. No search engine can do that.

With this in mind, here are some tips and techniques you can use to make your Google searching more effective.

Google Basics

Default Search:

When you search for more than one keyword at a time, Google automatically places the **AND** operator (Boolean) between keywords.

- Example: **fast food** (this is the same as searching: **fast AND food**) - in this case the words "fast" and "food" may not even show up on the same page, let alone right next to each other. The number of results will be huge.

Phrase Searching:

If you want your keywords to show up next to each other, as a phrase, place **quotes** around them.

- Example: **"fast food"** - now the words "fast" and "food" must show up next to each other on a web page before Google will include the page in its results. Phrase searching is a great way to limit the number of results that are returned.

Stop Words:

Google has a list of "stop words" that it refuses to search for because they are so common. Type them into the search box, and they will be ignored.

- Here is a list of some "stop words": a, about, an, and, are, as, at, be, by, from, how, I, in, is, it, of, on, or, that, the, this, to, we, what, when, where, which, with.

Tip: If you need to include a stop word in your search, place a plus sign (+) in front of the word.

- Example: **pirates +of +the caribbean**

Case Sensitivity:

Using either upper or lower case letters will return the exact same results.

- Example: **Las Vegas, las vegas, or LAS VEGAS** will return the same results.

Word Order:

The order in which you type your words does matter. Type the most important word(s) first. Try rearranging the order of your words, and you'll see how the results change - not only the number of results, but the order they're displayed as well.

Word Exclusion:

If the word you are searching has multiple meanings, you may wish to exclude certain words by placing the minus (-) sign in front of them. This works with multiple words.

- Example: **paris -hilton -texas**

Word Variations:

Google **may** search for plural/singular, synonyms, and grammatical variations without letting you know. Google is very inconsistent in this respect, and that is a weakness.

- Example: **child** - may search for **child, child's, children, and children's**. Then again, Google may only search for the exact word: **child**. You just never know.

Advanced Google Searching

The Google **Advanced Search** page includes several options to make your searches more effective through the use of drop down menus. Some of the more useful options include:

- **Format:** You can specify results only in PDF, PowerPoint, or Word. You can also exclude any format as well.
- **Date:** You can specify certain date ranges for your results. Current options include: anytime, 3 months, 6 months, or past year.
- **Domain:** You can include or exclude specific domains from your results. For example, you might want to exclude all **.com** sites from your results; or you may want your results to include only pages from **.edu** sites.

Truncation:

Google doesn't allow the use of an asterisk (*) to truncate a word, but does allow you to use it as a wildcard to substitute for any word in a phrase search.

- Example: "when you wish upon a *"

Synonym Search:

Use the tilde (~) symbol before any word to have Google include synonyms of that word in your search. The synonym finder may include plural, singular, or other grammatical variants as well. Similar to the "word variation" issue (above), this feature does not work with all words - it is very inconsistent.

- Example: **~adolescent** - will retrieve web pages that contain the word **adolescent, adolescence, child, young, and puberty.**

Search a Site:

If you know the web site you want to search but don't know where the information is, type what you're looking for followed by **site:URL** (no spaces).

- Example: **form 1040 site:www.irs.gov**