

THIRTY-SEVEN (37) NET SEARCH SECRETS

Searching for information on the Web can be an exercise in frustration. Either you can't find the information you want or you are deluged with more information than you could ever hope to absorb. These tips will help you find what you're looking for in as little time as possible.

1. Use more terms

Narrow the focus of your searches by using more terms. A search for *sheep*, for example, will net you over six million results on Google. A search for *merino lambs* cuts the results to under 12,000; while *merino wether lambs* gets you a much more manageable 600 results.

2. Narrow the focus

Another way to sharpen the focus of your searches is to try to include something unique or distinctive about your search topic, in order to eliminate unwanted results. For example, if you're trying to track down an old friend, instead of searching for "*jane doe*" try:

"jane doe" "eketahuna high school"

If you're searching for a store or service, include part of the address or the phone number in your search phrase.

3. Use specialist engines

You can use generalist search engines such as Google (www.google.com), Yahoo (www.yahoo.com) and AltaVista (www.altavista.com) to track down most types of sites and information on the Net, but often it makes more sense to use a specialist search engine. For instance, if you want to track down a rare or secondhand book, use one of the international book searches, such as BiblioZ (www.biblioZ.com), Alibris (www.alibris.com) or Bookfinder (www.bookfinder.com). For CDs, LPs and cassettes, use Gemm (www.gemm.com). For audio or video files, try SingingFish (www.singingfish.com).

4. Search a domain

Most search engines let you restrict your searches to a particular domain. At Google, Yahoo, Teoma (www.teoma.com) or Xtra Search (search.xtra.co.nz), add the keyword `site:` plus the domain name to your query. For example:

dolphin research site:au - Finds Australian sites about dolphin research.

Internet security site:netguide.co.au - Locates any mention of Internet security on *NetGuide's* Web site.

nanotechnology site:nature.com - Checks for references to nanotechnology in Nature magazine's site.

AltaVista lets you do the same thing using the keywords `domain:` or `host:`

5. Search Microsoft from afar

Microsoft has an excellent Knowledge Base (support.microsoft.com) stuffed with troubleshooting guides, tips and articles. Unfortunately, Microsoft's own Knowledge Base search engine is less than stellar. You'll frequently get much better results and turn up otherwise hard-to-find articles by searching the Knowledge Base using Google. Just type your search phrase into Google and add `site:microsoft.com` or `site:support.microsoft.com` to the search term. For example:

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"windows 98" shutdown problems site:support.microsoft.com

6. Avoid irrelevancies

Looking for information about fixing a broken window in your house and all you end up with is information about fixing Microsoft Windows? Eliminate unwanted results by getting the search engine to exclude any page containing certain words. The most common method is to prefix words to be excluded with a minus (-) sign:

repairing windows -microsoft -xp -98 -computer

Some search engines use the keyword NOT instead of a minus sign:

repairing windows NOT microsoft NOT xp NOT 98 NOT computer

7. Be an expert

Many search sites offer an advanced search option. You should see a link near the top of the main search page. Even if you're a beginner, give it a try! Often, the advanced search page is very simple to use, offering you a variety of options you can switch on or off using drop-down menus and checkboxes.

8. Use synonyms

Put a tilde (~) before your search term and Google will search for pages containing the search term and words with similar meanings. For example, ~cars pops up pages about automobiles, vehicles and trucks as well.

Be careful how you use this technique, though, as it has pitfalls. For example, a search for ~lumber turns up actor Elijah Wood's fan site!

9. Get the no-frills Yahoo

Instead of going to www.yahoo.com or www.yahoo.co.nz head to search.yahoo.com or au.search.yahoo.com. You'll get a much cleaner search page, with tabs for Web, Directory, News and Image searches.

10. Look up the meaning

Looking for the definition of a word? Check out Google's definitions. At the very top of its search results, to the right of the number of results found, you'll see search terms underlined. Click any of those words to see the word's definition.

A more efficient way to find the meaning of a word is to use Google's `define: keyword`. For example, `define:calumny` displays a couple of different definitions of the word instead of the usual search results page.

11 Understand basic Boolean

Almost all search engines use a series of logical terms, called Boolean operators, to control searches. The two most commonly used are AND and OR.

OR searches for documents that match *either* search term, for example: `sheep OR dip`, finds documents containing references to either sheep or dip or both. This search could turn up pages

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referring to sheep, to sheep dipping, to food dips (such as French onion dip), to dipsticks, and so on.

AND searches for documents that match *both* terms: *sheep AND dip* finds only those documents that refer to both sheep and dip. AND gives you much more focused results than OR. You should always type these Boolean operators in upper case.

12. Quote phrases

If you want to find an exact phrase, place the phrase in quotation marks, such as "paleolithic tortoise". This is one of the most efficient ways to narrow a search.

13. Beware the assumed AND

Google and some other search engines automatically assume the use of the Boolean AND operator whenever you type two or more terms. So searching for *guinea pigs* will pop results that match both terms to the top, while Web pages that contain either guinea or pigs or both those terms in separate places will appear further down the results list.

This makes a big difference. On Google, the search *guinea OR pigs* returns 5,810,000 results; *guinea pigs* (which is really a search for *guinea AND pigs*) returns 522,000 results; while the exact phrase "*guinea pigs*" returns 456,000 results.

14. Make small words count

Google usually discards "insignificant" words, such as the, and, be, with and so on. But what if those words are crucial to your search. For instance, what if you want to find references to Shakespeare's "To be or not to be?". Google ignores all but one word in this sentence, leaving you with a search for "not". You can put the phrase in quotation marks, but Google still has a tendency to discard small words. So precede each word with a plus sign (+) to force Google to include it.

15. Adjust the preferences

Look for each search engine's preferences or options page. Here you can adjust such things as how many results are displayed per page and whether results open in a new browser window. Make sure you have cookies enabled in your browser, or your preferences will not be saved for your next visit to the site.

16. Read all about it

Google has an excellent news site, which aggregates headlines from around the world and is updated every 15 minutes or so. You can search the news just as you would search the rest of the Web. You'll find Google News at news.google.com or, even better, the Australian version at news.google.com/news/en/au/main.html.

17. Visualise the answer

Want to know what a bustard looks like? Try an image search. Google, Yahoo, AlltheWeb (www.alltheweb.com), AskJeeves (www.ask.com), Lycos (www.lycos.com) and other search engines let you search for graphics and photos.

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18. Refine it

Teoma's Refine option offers suggestions for narrowing your search. Click any of the suggested topics and it displays matching results, plus the search phrase it used to generate those results. Sometimes you can refine a search repeatedly.

19. Watch your stems

Many search engines, including Google and AlltheWeb, broaden your searches by stemming.

Stemming searches for additional forms of a word. So a search for *cat* turns up pages about caterpillars, catacombs and so on.

Note that while the search for *cat* gets 51,600,000 hits on Google, a search for *cats* gets a mere 14,200,000 hits. That's partly because the plural form is a less open-ended term, but also because it cannot be stemmed in the same way as the singular form.

120. Evade the word limit

Google limits search phrases to 10 words, including operators such as NOT and OR. But Google ignores wildcards (*) in its count. So if you want to use a longer search term, try substituting a wildcard for one of the less significant words in your search term.

21. Check the cache

Yahoo and Google keep copies of old versions of Web pages in a cache on their servers. If you can't access one of the search sites in the results list, try clicking the Cache link to see if the cached version is available. It may be out of date, but sometimes it's the only way to gain access to a site that's closed or crashed.

You should also try the cache if the main page doesn't seem to contain the results you were expecting. This often happens with frequently updated pages, where the item you searched for has already been removed even though it still turns up as a match. Frequently, the cache will give you the older version of the page that matches your search term.

22. Add a search bar

Beef up your searching capabilities by adding a search toolbar to your browser. Teoma, Yahoo, Google, AskJeeves and several other search engines each have their own customised toolbars you can download and add to your browser.

23. Uncover the Deep Web

Not all the information on the Internet is stored in easily accessible Web pages. Much of it is hidden away in databases and other sites not visited by traditional search engines. Explore this hidden realm using CompletePlanet (www.completeplanet.com).

24. Metasearch it

Frustrated with the results from a single search engine? You may find it more useful to use a metasearch engine such as Ixquick (www.ixquick.com). Metasearch engines take your query,

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rephrase it appropriately and feed it to numerous search engines at the same time. The result is the broadest possible collection of search results.

25. Track down a bargain

If you're looking for something to buy, give Google's shopping search, Froogle (froogle.google.com), a try. By appending `site:au` to your search term, you can limit the results to Australian based sites.

26. Trace connections

If you have your own site, you can find out who's linking to you on the Web using Google's `link:` keyword. For example, `link:www.lotr.com` uncovers all pages that link to Lord of the Rings.com. You can use the same keyword for any site on the Web.

27. Search beyond HTML

Most of the pages indexed by search sites are Web pages designed using HTML (hypertext Markup Language) or a Web scripting language. But Google, Altavista, Yahoo and a number of other search engines also let you search for documents in other formats published on the Web.

That includes Microsoft Word (DOC), Excel (XLS), PowerPoint (PPT), Adobe Reader (PDF) and text (TXT) files. You can usually limit a search to a particular file type via the advanced search page options of a search engine.

Most of these documents can be viewed directly in your browser, or downloaded and then viewed locally. But you'll need to have the appropriate application installed to do so. For example, to view PowerPoint presentations, you'll either need to have a copy of PowerPoint installed or a copy of the free PowerPoint Viewer (available from tinyurl.com/ka4j).

28. Browse, don't search

If you know exactly what you're trying to track down, typing a phrase into a search engine is your best approach. But how do you go about searching when you have no idea where to start? And what about those times when you're simply interested in seeing the breadth of material available about a particular topic?

At those times, you're better off using a directory instead of a search engine. Directories organise the Web into topics, sub-topics, sub-sub-topics and so on. If you're interested in extraterrestrial life, for example, you could head over to Yahoo's Directory (dir.yahoo.com) and dig down through Science to Astronomy, then Exobiology and maybe find yourself exploring Extremophiles. Digging down through Science, Biology, Microbiology and Microorganisms will also lead you to Extremophiles, so many paths can uncover the same information.

Google has a directory, too, at directory.google.com ; AltaVista's is at www.altavista.com/dir

29. Check out the searchers

Want to know what other people are searching for? Try Google's Zeitgeist. In German, it means "the spirit of the times" (although, of course, you could find that out for yourself by running the query `define:zeitgeist` at Google). It has a weekly summary of the top 10 gaining search phrases

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and the top 10 declining phrases. Famous people seem to occupy many of those spots, and US queries are in abundance.

Access it by clicking on About Google, then Press Center and Zeitgeist.

Scroll down the Zeitgeist page to find some more interesting stats, including the most popular news queries, image searches and more.

30. Narrow your search

If your first search turns up too many results, Google lets you search within that first set of results, so you can narrow and hone the focus of your search. Scroll to the bottom of the first results page, type your new search phrase, and then click "Search Within These Results".

31. Useful site

SearchEngineWatch has a handy chart that lets you see at a glance the special keywords and operators used by each search engine. You'll find it at

searchenginewatch.com/facts/article.php/2155981

32. Beginner tip: Get lucky

Google features two buttons below its search box, one labelled Google Search, the other I'm Feeling Lucky. The latter can save a lot of time if you're after the most popular or most likely search result. Type in a search phrase, click I'm Feeling Lucky and Google will immediately open the site it considers the best match.

33. Beginner tip: Speak tersely to Google

Some search engines, such as AskJeeves (www.askjeeves.com), let you use full sentences for your searches, such as *What year was Sigourney Weaver born?* Not Google. It prefers you to keep things simple and avoid sentences. In fact, it tosses out many small words, such as "what" and "was", so typing them just wastes your time. Try for a more telegraphic approach: *Sigourney Weaver born* .

34. Beginner tip: Search locally

Where possible, use the localised version of a search engine, such as:

- www.google.co.au
- www.yahoo.co.au
- www.altavista.co.au
- www.searchnz.co.au

The local sites either let you limit searches to Australian sites or automatically pop Australian results to the top of the list.

35. Expert tip: GoogleIt!

The GoogleIt bookmarklet gives you the ability to highlight any word or phrase on a Web page in Internet Explorer and do an instant Google search for the highlighted term. A bookmarklet, by the

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way, is a browser bookmark or favourite that includes a little piece of code to make it do something smart.

To add GoogleIt to Internet Explorer, visit www.code9.com/googleit.html and drag the GoogleIt! link onto your Links bar. You'll receive a warning message. Click Yes to proceed.

Once installed, highlight any term on a Web page and then click the GoogleIt link to do a search.

NB: GoogleIt doesn't work on pages within framesets.

36. Expert tip : Try a wildcard

Google lets you use a wildcard in the form of an asterisk (*) to indicate the presence of *any* word in a search term. For example, "international * cross" will find sites dealing with the Red Cross and those dealing with the Blue Cross. You can also use two asterisks in a row to indicate any two words.

37. Expert tip: Search en masse

Some tabbed browsers, such as Mozilla (www.mozilla.org) and CrazyBrowser (www.crazybrowser.com), let you open multiple sites, save all those sites as a group, and then re-open the group with a single click. This is great for searching the Web. Open all your favourite search sites and then save them as a group. Next time you want to track down something, open the group of search sites and let loose a bunch of concurrent searches.

This information was taken from the NetGuide website at:

www.netguide.com.au/useful_stuff/tutorials