

# Fifteen Cool Searching Tips

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## 1. Directory or a search engine?

A directory is like the table of contents in a book. If you aren't sure of the exact subject or keywords you should use, try using a directory like Yahoo! to zero in on your topic. You'll get some good ideas by looking at the sites listed in each category of a good directory. Conversely, if you know exactly what you're looking for, and you can define it pretty specifically, use a search engine (which is like the index in the back of the book).

## 2. Use an engine's own help screens.

When using a search engine for the first time, take the time to read any instructions, "Tips" files, "Help" screens, and FAQs to find out such things as:

- What strings (or kinds of words) it accepts;
- What special features it has;
- Which Boolean operator it uses as the default; and
- If you have any options in the way the results are presented to you.

## 3. Know what you're looking for!

Understanding your topic and knowing some of the terminology of your subject will help enormously when you start searching. The broader and more ill defined the search query, the more extraneous, useless information you will find. You can learn about your subject as you search, but it's better to have some basic background information on the topic, so you can narrow down the search, be precise, and target the needed information quickly and efficiently.

## 4. Comparison shopping is fun and good.

Run your search on different search engines and compare the results. All search engines are not the same, and don't be afraid to try some of the big meta search engines like Profusion, Dogpile, or Mama. Also try your search in different ways on the same engine to begin to understand how each engine works. For example, a string of three words entered in differing order will give different results on the same engine.

## 5. When possible, specialize.

Don't assume the large, general search engines are always the best. Consider a specialized index such as FindLaw, a database on legal code and case law (<http://www.findlaw.com>), for example, when you're looking for specific legal information.

## 6. Proper names?

When searching for a proper name, capitalize the first letter of each word. If you enter the term with an upper case first letter, some engines will find only terms that are the same way. By entering a name like Bill Gates with the first letter capitalized, you will not get sites about garden gates, or paying that bill. But...some engines (like Google) don't care if letters are capitalized or not. Use a directory like Yahoo (<http://people.yahoo.com>) to find someone's e-mail address or telephone number. Use a regular search engine to find information about that person.

## 7. Phrase searching

Almost every search engine will let you enter a phrase of two or more words as a string if you enclose it in quote marks. This tactic makes the engine find the words you want in that exact order. If, for example, you are looking for *history of candles*, you will get all sites with either the word *history* or the word *candles* in them—in any order. (The word "or" is ignored by most engines as too common to have any meaning.) But if you use the phrase, "*history of*

*candles,*” you will get only sites that have those three words in them in that order. Try it and see the difference.

## **8. Wildcards**

Learn to use a wildcard to find combinations of words or word fragments. Almost all of the engines use an asterisk for a wildcard, while Excite automatically looks for all combinations of the word. Use a wildcard to get a plural (dog\* = dogs as well as dog), a different spelling (wom\*n = woman as well as women), or various suffixes (nation\* = nation, national, or nationality). Google doesn't use wildcards except to replace an entire word.

## **9. English is great, but ...**

Beware of terms with double meanings. “Chicks” can pull up graphics of a woman scantily dressed in sexy black leather outfits in addition to chicken hatching. “Spiders” can be computer programs used by search engines or fuzzy bugs with lots of legs. I did a search for “slide rules” to find out where to buy that old-fashioned mathematics tool, and I pulled up a site entitled “Slide Rules,” that was all about good design principles for doing a video presentation!

## **10. Keep it short!**

Often, a search will retrieve links to many documents at one site. Rather than clicking on each URL in succession, truncate the URL (at the point at which it appears most likely to represent the topic you are seeking) in your browser's Address (URL) box and press the enter key. This will take you to the main site from which you can then branch out to individual pages that most closely matches your topic. Some of the engines will only give you one reference to each site, but you can then choose to see all of the pages from that site.

## **11. Spell the terms write!**

Watch your spelling. Misspelling changes search results. See also Tip # 9 for a similar message.

## **12. Boolean is cool.**

Master Boolean logic—all search engines use some form of it to refine searches, even if they phrase it differently. Learn how to use the AND, OR, and NOT (or BUT NOT, or AND NOT in some engines) to include or exclude certain terms, or broaden your search. The use of a plus sign to include a term is like a Boolean AND, and a minus sign is like a Boolean NOT.

## **13. Get to know your favorite engine in depth.**

Each search engine is different. Decide on your favorite and learn its nuances in depth. Learn all its whys and wherefores, and read all of the help screens and tip sheets. Just like learning a foreign language, once you've mastered one, the second one is easier. *But remember, no engine indexes the entire web.* (There are now more than six billion pages on the web, and maybe as many as seven or eight billion!)

## **14. “Find” the answer...**

If it is not clearly evident why a search engine retrieved a document, use the browser's FIND command on the Edit menu to search for the text in the current document or page.

## **15. Don't be afraid of a lot...**

Just because you got 2,307,869 hits, don't worry! Check out the first 10 or 20 and see if they're right on. If not, re-work your search terms. And don't be afraid to power off your machine and try again another day. Don't let your frustration level build to the point where you're not having fun and you're not learning anything positive.