



How can I get the best results from my Internet search?

We all use search engines daily to look for news, recipes, or music but when it comes to work, we often need a more systematic approach to Internet searches that saves time and returns the best results. In this Snapshot, we share our learnings about how to make the search engines work best for your work.

Want to learn more about Pathways in Place?

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Why does it matter?

Most of us regularly use Internet search engines such as Google in our working lives. Despite this, getting the most out of search engines is not as easy as it seems. Based on our team's experience, we realised that it takes much more than 'just Googling' to get the most meaningful and relevant results from Internet searches.

This Snapshot outlines three of our main learnings:

1. How to choose the right search engine?
2. What search techniques get the best result?
3. What are the key things to have in mind when searching Google?

How to choose the right search engine?

Google is the world's most popular search engine, with around 90% of the global search engine market share.^[1]

While this means Google is generally the go-to search engine, it may not always return the most relevant results for professional or research purposes.

This is primarily due to the personalisation of search results, which means that Google will automatically tailor your search results based on a range of different information, including your stored browser cookies, web history, login status, geographical location, and language.^[2]

In other words, regardless of your search terms, Google won't necessarily return the most relevant results for the *topic*, but instead will provide results that are perceived to be most relevant to *you*.

We recommend always complementing a Google search with either searching in another major search engine such as Yahoo or Bing, or with a privacy-oriented search engine such as DuckDuckGo.^[3] Unlike the major search engines, DuckDuckGo does not store searches nor track the activity of its users. This has positive implications for user privacy, and can also help unearth search results that are not returned by the major search engines.

It is important to note that each search engine uses its own algorithm to return search results and sort them by relevance. Most of us will never fully understand how search engines operate, and many search engine algorithms are well-kept secrets, but following some simple rules can increase the likelihood that your search will return the most relevant results.

In the next section, we share some of the most important lessons we have learned about various search techniques.

What search techniques get the best result?

To get the best result from your Internet search, you need to let the search engine know what you are looking for in a language it can understand. You can do this by using Boolean operators, which are simple words such as 'AND', 'OR', and 'NOT' that are common to most databases and search engines.

They are used in addition to specific search terms (i.e., key words) and search modifiers (such as quotation marks and parentheses) to find the most relevant results. They can narrow or broaden the search results. The following table outlines some of the most common search techniques, their functions and examples of how to use the technique.

Table 1 - Common search techniques: their functions and examples of use

SEARCH TECHNIQUE	FUNCTION	EXAMPLE
Using Boolean operator 'AND'	Limits results to those that include both search terms (i.e., narrows the search)	Place-based AND collaboration (Returns results that include only both place-based and collaboration)
Using Boolean operator 'OR'	Limits results to those that include either search terms, or both (i.e., broadens the search)	Place-based OR collaboration (Returns results that include both place-based or collaboration, or place-based and collaboration)
Using Boolean operator 'NOT'	Excludes specified terms from the results (i.e., narrows the search)	Place-based NOT collaboration (Returns results that include place-based but not collaboration)
Using search modifier quotation marks (" ")	Limits results to those that include an exact match to the phrase inside the quotes.	"Place-based collaboration" (Returns results that include an exact phrase 'place-based collaboration')
Using search query site:(domain)	Limits results to those that originate from a specific site or domain.	site:pathwaysinplace.com.au place-based collaboration (Only returns results from the specified website that include 'place-based collaboration')



The advice provided in the next section is specific to performing Google searches, but it may also be applicable to using search engines such as Bing or DuckDuckGo. We always recommend looking up some specific strategies or techniques for your preferred search engine.

What are the key things to have in mind when searching Google?

General information

- Google searches have a limit of 32 words, excluding Boolean operators.
- Google searches automatically look for stems of words and synonyms. For example, differences in spelling (e.g., British vs American) will be automatically picked up by Google.
- Unlike some academic databases such as Scopus and Web of Science, Google searches don't support the use of parentheses to combine multiple enclosed word groups, e.g., ("place-based approach" OR "collective impact") AND (Victoria OR Queensland OR South Australia).
- If you want to use exact phrases such as "community expert", "collective impact" or "place-based approach" you need to put the phrase in double quotation marks.
- Put only a single space between the search terms.

Capitalisation

- Some search engines and databases rely on the capitalisation of Boolean operators, while others don't. We recommend always using uppercase for Boolean operators (and lowercase for search terms) just in case.

Hyphenated words

- Google does not recognise a hyphen unless you put it in quotation marks. Using a hyphen in Google leads to an exclusion of the word that comes after the hyphen, same as using a Boolean operator 'NOT'. Therefore, if one of your search terms has a hyphen e.g. place-based, make sure you put it under double quotation marks "place-based".
- If you want to exclude specific terms you can use a Boolean operator 'NOT' or put a hyphen before the word you want to exclude. The term will not be fully excluded in the search results but displayed much less than it otherwise would be.

Non-personalised search results

If you don't want Google to personalise your search results, you need to:

- Manually turn off Google's automatic customisation for every new search: click 'Settings' in the bottom right-hand corner. Click 'Search settings' from the menu and then click 'Search results'. Under 'Personal results', click 'Manage' and then click the toggle switch next to 'Show personal results' to disable customised results.
- Delete your browser's search history and Google search history. You can follow these steps available at: vpmentor.com/blog/how-to-delete-your-google-search-history.

Google Advanced

- You can also consider using Google Advanced, i.e., google.com/advanced search, which may be more straightforward for people who are not used to searching with Boolean operators. In Google Advanced, Boolean operators are automatically included by Google.



References

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Suggested Citation

Klepac, B., Mowle, A., Klamert, L., Riley, T., Craike, M. How can I get the best result from my Internet search? Methods Snapshot. Pathways in Place: Co-creating Community Capabilities. Victoria University, Victoria; 2022. <https://doi.org/10.26196/zx9g-vt30>

The research was funded by the Paul Ramsay Foundation. Any opinions, findings, or conclusions expressed in this snapshot are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

About Pathways in Place

Pathways in Place: Co-Creating Community Capabilities is an innovative program of research and action that supports flourishing of children and young people. This Program is jointly delivered by Victoria University (Victoria, Australia) and Griffith University (Queensland, Australia) with funding generously provided by the Paul Ramsay Foundation.

The Program teams are each leading one of two complementary streams:

1. Early learning and development pathways (children and youth 0-15 y.o.), led by Griffith University in Logan (Queensland, Australia).
2. Pathways through education to employment (youth 15-24 y.o.), led by Victoria University in Brimbank (Victoria, Australia).



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