Four NETS for Better Searching

The perfect page is out there somewhere. It's the page that has exactly the information you're looking for and to you it's beautiful and unattainable like a faraway star. If only you had a super-sized net for capturing it!

Most people use a search engine by simply typing a few words into the query box and then scrolling through whatever comes up. Sometimes their choice of words ends up narrowing the search unduly and causing them not to find what they're looking for. More often the end result of the search is a haystack of off-target web pages that must be combed through. You can do better than that, and that's what this page is about.

The most comprehensive engine out there at the moment seems to be Google, and that's what we'll focus on here. The first step in becoming a facile catcher of web pages is to master Google's Advanced Search form located at **http://www.google.com/ advanced_search**. Bookmark it! Drag the bookmark to your browser's toolbar so that it's always available.

If you make a habit of using the four techniques described below, you'll be a much better searcher than 90% of all web-users. It's just four things, and each will provide you with a better net for information catching.

NEW: Use this worksheet to record your search results.

Net 1: Start **N**arrow

The biggest problem people have with search engines (perhaps) is that they're so good! You can type in a word and within a fraction of a second you'll have 20,000 pages to look at. Most of those pages will not be exactly what you're after, and you have to spend a load of time wading through the 19,993 that aren't quite right.

If you know what you're after, why not start by asking for it as precisely as you can?

Think of all the words that would always appear on the perfect page. Put those in the **WITH ALL THE WORDS** field.

Think of all the distracting pages that might also turn up because one or more of your search terms has multiple meanings. What words can you think of that might help you eliminate those pages? Put those in the **WITHOUT** field.

If there's a term with synonyms, either of which might appear on the page you're after, put them in the **WITH ANY OF THE WORDS** field.

Try each of the searches now, and record how many sites you find.

As you do each search, take note of what kinds of things turn up. Notice that the more specific the terms you include and exclude, the more focused your search.

Query	# Matches
Imagine that you're interested in the legendary lost continent of Atlantis. There have been several movies with Atlantis in the title, but you're not interested in them. You are also not interested in the space shuttle Atlantis. Try this search… **WITH ALL:** Atlantis continent **WITHOUT:** shuttle film movie	Write the number of hits you get below.
Here's how to search for it badly: **WITH ALL:** Atlantis	
Here's another search to try: **WITH ALL:** Waterbury **WITH AT LEAST ONE:** Vermont VT **WITHOUT**: Connecticut CT	
Here's how to search for Waterbury, VT. badly: **WITH**: Waterbury	

Net 2: Find Exact Phrases

Words hang together in predictable ways. If you type a phrase into the EXACT PHRASE field in Google, you'll be able to locate pages in which those words appear together in that order. This is obviously useful for finding things that have a proper name consisting of several words (e.g., places, book titles, people).

It's also useful when you can remember a distinctive phrase in something you've read, but now need to locate it. What's the rest of the poem that starts with "Jenny kissed me when we met"?

The ability to search for phrases can be surprisingly useful. Do you suspect that something your student turned in was plagiarized, or at least heavily borrowed without attribution? Type in a phrase or two from the paper and see if it turns up elsewhere! You can also check to see if your own work is being copied without your permission.

Another use for this feature: stamping out urban legends. Next time you get an e-mail warning you about a repressive new law about to pass or a vicious computer virus about to attack, check it out before passing on misinformation to others. Type in any unusual or unique phrase you see in the e-mail and see if others have commented on this particular rumor.

Query	# Matches
You've heard of a fine public university in the lower left corner of the United States and you want to know more about it. Try this search… **EXACT PHRASE:** San Diego State University	**Write the number of hits you get below.**
Here's how to search for it badly: **WITH ALL:** San Diego State University	
Here are some more searches to try: **EXACT PHRASE:** Bill 602P	
EXACT PHRASE: We know he has weapons of mass destruction	
EXACT PHRASE: demonstrating genuine leadership	
EXACT PHRASE: Jenny kissed me when we met	

Net 3: Trim Back the URL

The next net is not Google-specific, though you'll find yourself using it often once you get better at Googling.

Often you'll find a terrific page nestled deep down inside a folder inside a folder inside a folder. You suspect that there are other pages you'd find interesting nearby. How to you find them? Trim the URL step by step.

Sometimes you'll get a notice saying FORBIDDEN! Sometimes you'll get a list of files and directories. Sometimes you'll get an web page with more links. Each step back tells you more about where the page came from.

This is also a good strategy to try when a page goes missing (that is, you get a 404 message). Perhaps someone at the site moved the page into a new folder or renamed a folder. Trace your way back to the top and drill down again to see if you can find it.

You found this Romeo & Juliet WebQuest that you really like. Are there more like that where this one came from?

Start here:

http://oncampus.richmond.edu/academics/education/projects/webquests/shakespeare/

Now trim away the last part:

http://oncampus.richmond.edu/academics/education/projects/webquests/

What do you see?

Trim it again, Sam:

http://oncampus.richmond.edu/academics/education/projects/
http://oncampus.richmond.edu/academics/education/
http://oncampus.richmond.edu/academics/
http://oncampus.richmond.edu/

Now try this:

A friend told you of another cool Shakespeare WebQuest and emailed you the URL:

http://www.longwood.k12.ny.us/wmi/wq/collin/index.html

That URL turned out to be wrong, though. Can you find the real URL, and see if there are other worthy WebQuests at the same site?

Net 4: Look for Similar Pages

Once you've found something you like on Google, it's very easy (and useful) to find similar pages. How? Below the advanced search fields that you've been using up until now are another two fields. These allow you to find pages that Google has deemed to be similar to or linked to any URL you type in.

How does Google know that two pages are similar? The details of the inner workings of search engines are a trade secret, but it's safe to assume that it's based on similarities in the words and the external links on each page. All that matters is that it works surprisingly well, especially when you're not sure what key words to look for.

Use this tool to find more of a good thing. Use it to find pages that are linked to a page that you find useful. Chances are, those pages might be useful to you, too.

And there's always ego surfing: if you've uploaded a page of your own to a public server and it's been there for awhile, find out who else is linking to it.

Query	# Matches
Suppose that you've discovered Tapped In, an online community of educators, and you're wondering what else like that is out there. Using Google's similarity search will surface a number of sites that are likely to interest you. **SIMILAR TO:** www.tappedin.org	**Write the number of hits you get below.**
Another way to explore a domain is to find out who else is linked to a page. Who else finds Tapped In useful enough to include on one of their pages? **LINKED TO:** www.tappedin.org	
Here's another search to try: **SIMILAR TO:** kids.msfc.nasa.gov	
LINKED TO: kids.msfc.nasa.gov	

Page-Specific Search

Similar	Find pages similar to the page	[ ] Search
		e.g. www.google.com/help.html
Links	Find pages that link to the page	[ ] Search

So, to recap… remembering the word NETS will help you to remember the four techniques you just experimented with:

Start **N**arrow

Use **E**xact Phrases

Trim the URL

Seek **S**imilar Pages

If you can keep these four phrases in mind, you'll be a much better searcher than you were a few minutes ago!

And to add to your bag of tricks, you might also want to check out the Specialized Search Engines page. Or try out some other Google services and hacks!

http://webquest.sdsu.edu/searching/fournets.htm
Written by Bernie Dodge. Last updated June 22, 2005. There are also Spanish, UK **(new)** and multi-page versions.

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