

How to use Google for Research

A 1000 word article

by

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Love it or hate it – few writers can get by without doing at least some research. Whether you need to check a few facts, or gather background for an entire novel, it's likely the Internet will be your first port of call. We're constantly told that the world wide web is a rich mine of information just waiting to be plundered, and few would argue that Google is its most popular search tool. But what if you've tried – and failed – to find what you're looking for, even when it seems so simple? What if you are sick of trawling through pages and pages of irrelevant results for your carefully worded enquiry? You need to learn how to get the best out of the best search engine around, and you need to learn it fast.

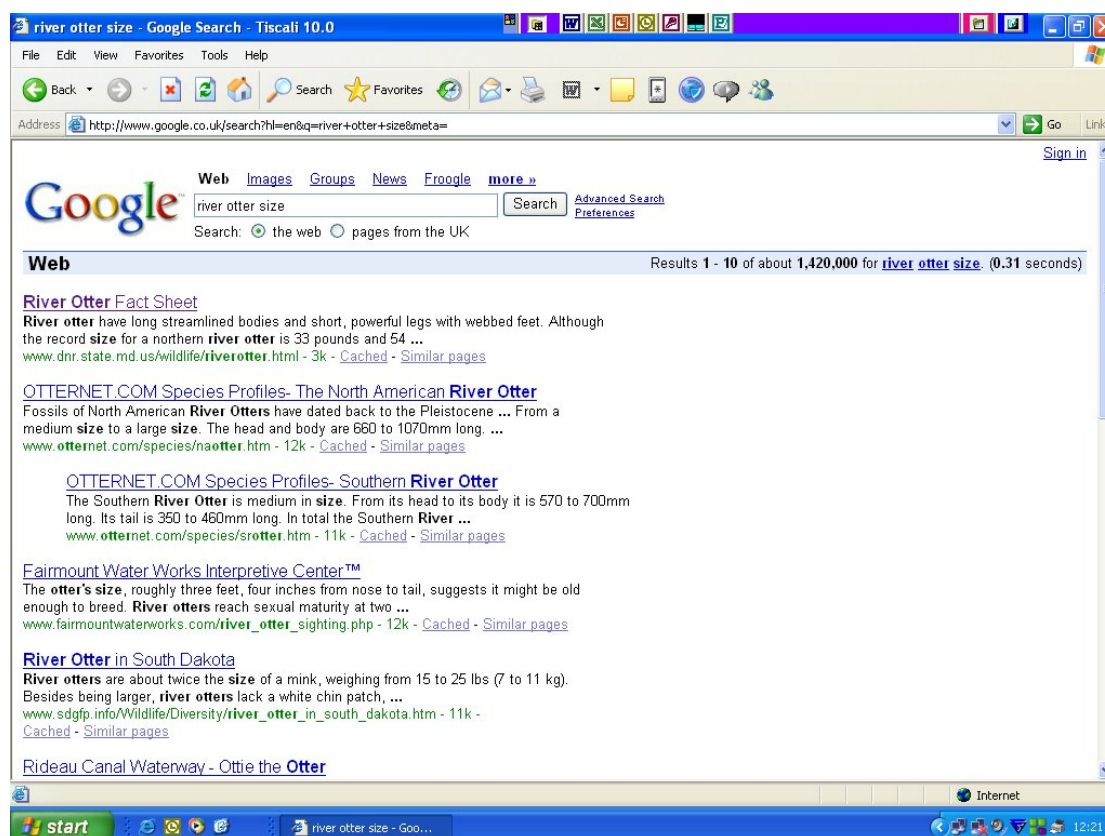
The place to start is to understand a little bit more about how Google works: you enter your query in the box and then what happens? As soon as you click search (or press enter), Google's search engine looks through billions of web pages to find matching words. Usually this takes less than half a second. The results are displayed with the most useful, popular, and relevant sites at the top, and with a short snippet of information underneath the title. The important thing to note is: the search engine examines the *content* of a web page for words or terms that match your enquiry. If

you can remember this, and translate it into a useful search query, you are already halfway there.

How does this help? Let's look at an actual example. Suppose you are working on an article for a wildlife magazine and need to quickly check a few facts; in this case the size of an otter. (Writers need to search for all sorts of weird and wonderful

information!) Lots of people struggle with Google because they word their query as a question, but unless the question itself appears in the text of a page the chances are it's not going to work. A search for the question: **Where can I find out about otters?** returns a page of results which don't quite match what we want: A blog (web log) called 'respectful of otters'; a site about sea otters; an Amazon listing for books on the subject.

Think instead of the wording you would like to see *within the text* of the web page and be as specific as possible. Try **river otter size** and you immediately find out that the average otter weighs 18 pounds and is 40 inches long. Males are approximately 17 percent larger than females. Fascinating!



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You don't need great technical knowledge to get the best out of the Google search engine, but a little understanding will take you a long way. Google searches for *all* the words in your query, for example **river** AND **otter** AND **size**. This is useful to remember because there may be times when you want to tell it NOT to look for a particular word. When might you want to do this? Suppose you need to find out about coaching for an article you're writing on management strategies. A search for **coaching** brings up lots of sport's coaching websites. You could scroll through them all until you (hopefully) find what you need. Or you could simply add a minus sign followed by the unwanted word, as in **-sport**, to the end of your existing query and, low and behold, a plethora of coaching and mentoring sites for you to browse and not a sports coach in sight.

The last and possibly most useful technique I'm going to tell you about is how to use quotation marks. Google will usually search for all the words in your query but not necessarily together or in the same order. You can get around this by putting your query in double quotation marks. This is particularly helpful when you are looking up lines in a play, the lyrics to a song, or personal and 'insider' knowledge about a subject, for example: **“my coaching experiences”**.

Imagine you are searching for information about what it was like to give birth in the 1960s. It could be for a novel where you need background details for one of the characters, or even for an article comparing experiences then and now. The query **childbirth 1960** in the Google search box brings up a wealth of sites including such diverse topics as statistics, hypnosis, books on childbirth and the history of midwifery, none of which seem to be exactly what you need. You *could* spend an hour trawling through each site and then give up in despair. Once you understand how Google works, however, you can make a more directed search and get the information you need immediately.

Try searching for **“women who gave birth” 1960s**. Google searches the text of all relevant web pages for the exact phrase in the quotation marks, and for the date 1960. This search turned up a fantastic website which gives colour and detail to the birth experiences of women in that era.

Now you're itching to get to a computer and try out your new techniques, but wait! Did you know that Google can also act as a dictionary? Type in your word and press enter. Click on definition in the blue results bar and link to **answers.com** for an instant explanation. Here you'll also find a thesaurus, a translation tool and Wikipedia references (the online encyclopaedia that everyone who's anyone is using).

There are other search engines, of course, such as Yahoo! and MSN. There are also search engines which search other search engines, like Dogpile and Metacrawler. Google is not the only fruit; it's just the most popular. Try them all, and when you find the one that works for you, master it and make it work hard for you. After all, the less time you spend on research, the more time you have for writing.

For more information about using Google see *How To Do Everything With Google*, Fritz Schneider, et al. ISBN 0072231742

Sidebar:

If you think you know the term you want to search for but you're not sure, type ~ in front of it. Google will look for synonyms at the same time so you don't have to think of all possible related words.

Ends. 1000 words