

Implied Boolean & the Search for Wisdom

Five tips for better online searches

By Christopher Elliott

Having trouble finding something online?

Take a number. A 2004 study by the Online Publishers Association found that we spend 6% of our time online just looking for things. Now that may not sound like much, but if you stop to think about it for a second, it's really *too* much. . . .

That's nothing against search engines, by the way. But here are five ways to cut down on the time you spend looking for something.

1. Be as precise as possible in your search. By using an exact search phrase, you're more likely to get the answer you're looking for. "This helps you find an exact phrase on a Web page and will usually lead to the information you are looking for very quickly," says Rich Kahn, chief operating officer for BlowSearch, a New York-based meta-search engine. For example, a query for "word processor" will yield vastly different results than "Microsoft Word."

Also, **use quotation marks**, which is common search-engine syntax for "look for that exact phrase." Many search engines also have a box for "Exact Phrase Match" that you can check.

2. Get to know what Boolean searching means, and does. Boolean search terms allow you to get even more precise with your queries. The three main search terms — "AND," "NOT" and "OR" — enable you to include or exclude certain terms in your results. (Most search engines, but not all, accept so-called "full" Boolean terms. Check the fine print to find out if your favorite search engine will do it.)

Full Boolean search terms (we'll get to the implied ones in a minute) can really speed up your search. For example, say you want to get the latest intelligence on laptop battery life. As I am writing this, I did a query for "laptop computer" on MSN Search and it yields 7,561,382 results. But "laptop compute" AND "battery life" pulls up only 212,544 results (getting closer). If I tack on "NOT power supply," I get only 13,170 results, which is far more manageable. Want to get rid of all the Web sites hawking batteries? Just add OR "for sale," and — presto! — I'm down to 4,062 results.

Boolean searching, by the way, is named after British-born Irish mathematician George Boole, a 19th-century scholar who pioneered the use of "and," "not" and "or" in mathematical analysis.

3. Do it quicker with implied Boolean. Implied Boolean, the cousin to full Boolean search terms, is accepted by virtually every search engine. Plus, it's even faster to use. Stephen Scarr, chief executive for



Info.com, a Chicago meta-search engine, says learning implied Boolean operators can shave time off your searches.

For example, if you want to ensure that a particular word is in the results, use a plus sign (+), such as “Henry Ford” + benefactor. If you want your results to exclude a certain term, use a minus sign (-), such as “Henry Ford” -car. For best results, use both. For example, if you wanted to search for Henry Ford’s role as a benefactor but weren’t interested in cars, the best search term would be “Henry Ford” +benefactor -car. (Note the quotes around Henry Ford will ensure that only that word combination is present in your results.) **Most search engines these days use + as the default if you do not specify.**

4. Build a “nest.” Face it, you may not always know what you’re looking for. When that happens, nesting can be a real help. Maybe you’ve seen professional librarians use brackets in their search terms, and you’ve wondered what they’re doing. They’re building a nest. For instance, let’s say I’m looking for recent articles I’ve written. But my name is constantly misspelled, even by eagle-eyed editors. Sometimes my byline is “Chris,” other times it’s “Christopher.” And “Elliott” is often incorrectly spelled “Elliot.” Nesting to the rescue! If I want to pull up all of my technology articles, I type “Technology” AND (Christopher OR Chris AND Elliott OR Elliot) and I won’t miss any of my insightful articles about technology.

5. Give your search engine a workout. Many (but not all) search engines allow you to use advanced terms to hone in on the information you’re looking for. Take wildcard terms, for example. A “#” or “*” symbol can sometimes be used within a word to search for all possible variants — so, for example “wom#n” would search for both “woman” and “women.” And a search for “exhaust*” would pull up results for “exhausted” and “exhaustion” and even “exhaust pipe.” (Some search engines also use “?” instead of “*,” but the result is the same.)

Finally, if you want to search for a term that is near another, there’s something for that, too. Try using “NEAR” or “ADJ” (each search engine handles these terms slightly differently) to find results in which one word is near or adjacent to another.

These tips can help you get a good start on conducting more effective Web searches. But better results also come from practice, says Matt Rodbard, editorial assistant for Sync magazine, a publication that focuses on technology usability. “People often expect instant success,” he says. “But searching, like

***And remember, use “Advanced Search”
– it’s for beginners!***