Search options
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Technology news
Dotcom news
Boot camp
Competition
Computer books

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Site index
About us
Contact us

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Bootcamp 275: The good Google guide
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COMPLETE BOOTCAMP ARCHIVE

Top traumas solved by Rick Maybury

- Jargon filter
- Top tip

As everyone who has been following the *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* TV fraud trial now knows, a "googol" is the name given to the number one followed by a hundred zeros.

The big-number idea was the inspiration for the name of the internet's favourite search engine, Google, and the numbers involved are indeed mind-boggling. Google handles more than 200m searches a day using an index of more than 3 billion web pages on over 10,000 Linux server computers.

This week we take a close look at how Google works, some of its hidden features and utilities, and offer tips to make your searches faster and more productive.

Google is popular because it is fast and there is no clutter. On a bad day you can wait 10 seconds or more for some rival search engines just to load their front page; Google appears more or less instantly and the first page of "hits" normally takes less than a second to display.

Results pages are clearly presented and easy to understand - there are no banner ads or fancy graphics to slow things down. It's not entirely ad-free but the "Sponsored Links" are unobtrusive and often relevant.

EXTERNAL LINKS
- Google.co.uk
- Google.com
- Support - Poweroid.com
- International IT company database - Poweroid
- Drivers, driver downloads - Poweroid
- Support - Symantec
- Support - Microsoft
- Technical database (knowledge base) - Microsoft

The secret of Google’s success is the way it seeks information. Conventional search engines scan for matching keywords but Google combines this with analysis of the document’s content and a technique called "PageRank".

This rates pages according to the volume of links or "votes" to it from other web pages. The bottom line is that you are more likely to find what you are looking for in the first page or two of results.

Google works well, but there are ways to make it better. You can make it more accessible by making it your home page (in Internet Explorer Tools > Internet Options, General tab). If you specify the UK site (www.google.co.uk) this will help eliminate US advertising and assist Page Ranking to return more UK results.

Better, install the Google "toolbar" and put a Search window on every web page. There are two versions: the "Advanced" toolbar reports back to Google with the URLs of the pages you visit to help with page ranking; the other one doesn’t. So if you are concerned about privacy select the one "without advanced features".

You will find the toolbar by clicking on Services and Tools on the Google home page. While you are on the Services and Tools menu, have a look at Google Labs. There you will find experimental utilities such as the Google Viewer. This displays search results automatically and could be useful if you have difficulty using the mouse or keyboard.

The trick to searching for information on Google, or any other search engine for that matter, is to choose your search terms carefully and know a little about the process.

Google isn’t case-sensitive, so you can save effort by not bothering with capital letters. It also ignores so-called "stop" words. These are common characters and words it doesn’t stop to look for. They include "a", "in", "the", "to", "how", "where" and so on.

However, if a word is essential to a search you can include it by putting a plus sign ("+") in front of it, or by surrounding the words or phrase with quotation marks. For example, try searching for to be or not to be - and the only word Google will look for is "not". Try it again with "to be or not to be" (in double quotes) and you will get a completely different, Shakespearean set of results.

Although Google doesn't support full Boolean searches it does recognise the logical command "OR" (it must be in capital letters or it will be treated as a stop word). You would use this to narrow down a search for documents or websites that contain one word or another.

For example, to confine a search for a digital camera to two specific brands (single words only) you might type "digital camera sony OR nikon". In this example you can further reduce the number of irrelevant hits by adding "uk" and this will increase the chances of UK companies selling the products appearing at the top of the list.

Google also recognises a number of other commands to refine your searches, such as "link:" which will list all the websites that have a link to a page, and "related:" which details pages that have a similar content to the one you are looking for. A list of these Advanced Query Words and how to use them can be found at: http://www.google.com/help/operators.html#link

If all that sounds like hard work then just click the Advanced Search button for a simple-to-use set of search filters. Incidentally, do not exclude results just because they are in a foreign language. If the site is in Italian, French, Spanish, German, or Portuguese just click the Translate link and it will be turned into fair English.

A dictionary definition is automatically included in most searches - at the top of the results page, underlined on the Web search tab just below the Google logo. You will also find a link to a thesaurus on the dictionary definitions page.

Other useful shortcuts include an automatic search for stock market quotes when you key in a three-letter "ticker" code and this will be shown at the top of a results listing.

You will notice that most results end with an underlined "Cached" link. This takes you to the web page or document where Google originally found your keyword or search term. These are stored on Google's vast array of servers and this facility can be handy if the page is no longer available or the website is off-line.

Finally, if you're bored with Google's English, have a little fun with some alternative languages. Go to Preferences on the home page and on the Interface Language drop-down menu try Bork bork bork!, Hacker or Elmer Fudd.

Jargon filter

Boolean search
Advanced technique using logical commands such as AND, OR, NOT and so on, to define a keyword or document search

Linux
Powerful computer operating system used in many high-powered or demanding applications where speed and stability are crucial

URL
Uniform Resource Locator - a standard internet address, for example http://www.connected.telegraph.co.uk

Return to top

Top tip

Google provides a fascinating insight into what it is being used for, and what's hot and what's not on the internet. On the "zeitgeist" page (www.google.co.uk/press/zeitgeist.html) you will find lists of the most frequently used search words, terms, phrases, names and patterns based on the 55 billion searches carried out in the previous year. Click on the Archive link for month-by-month breakdowns on everything from railway-related searches to top TV shows.

- **Next week:** LP to PC to CD