



CANADA'S CENTRE
FOR DIGITAL AND
MEDIA LITERACY

How to Search the Internet Effectively

Search Engines

Internet search engines are a big part of how we find things online. You can get the most out of them by learning how they work, and how to use them quickly and effectively.

The challenge is to ask your question the right way, so that you don't end up overwhelmed with too many search results, underwhelmed with too few, or simply unable to locate the material that you need. As with most skills, practise makes perfect!

Before doing a search, it's important to define your topic as completely and succinctly as possible. Write down exactly what information you're looking for, why you're looking for it, and what you're not looking for. This will help you to discover the best keywords for your search.

Keywords

Search engines don't read sentences the way people do: instead, they look for the key words in your query in the websites they search. In other words, you're not asking a search engine a question, you're asking it to look for websites where those words appear. In order to use a search engine or database effectively you need to be able to choose the best combination of **key words**.

Most search engines work best if you provide them with several keywords. So how do you determine which keywords will work best?

Think about what you're searching for to determine the essential key words. For instance, if you're just looking for a recipe for peanut butter cookies, you can write *peanut butter cookie recipe*. But if you're looking for a recipe that doesn't use flour, you can write *peanut butter cookie recipe flourless* (the order of the words doesn't matter) and if you want a vegan recipe you can write *peanut butter cookie recipe flourless vegan*. If you want to only see results that include a particular word, put that word in quotes: so if you write *peanut butter cookie recipe "vegan"* you will only get results that include the word "vegan."

Now you have your keywords. How do you enter them into the search engine?

Use of Phrases

Your most powerful keyword combination is the phrase. Phrases are combinations of two or more words that must be found in the documents you're searching for in the EXACT order shown. You enter a phrase - such as "peanut butter" - into a search engine, within quotation marks.

Most search engines allow you to use quotation marks or square brackets to do a phrase search as in "peanut butter" or [peanut butter].



Make sure your phrase doesn't suggest the answer to your question: *"cats better than dogs"* will get you more results that say cats are better than dogs, and *"dogs better than cats"* will do the reverse.

People who spread misinformation sometimes flood the internet with results for a particular phrase, so that people searching for it will only see their point of view. If someone tells you to search a phrase like *"aliens built the pyramids"*, use a more general phrase like *"who built pyramids"* instead.

Limiting Your Search

If you find that you're getting results that aren't what you're looking for, you can use a minus sign to exclude results that include a certain word or phrase. So if you want recipes that use peanut butter but **aren't** cookie recipes, you could use *"peanut butter" recipe -cookie* (the minus sign has to be directly before the word you want excluded, with no space in between).

You can also limit your search by type, time or country. Most search engines have tabs at the top that let you choose between websites, images, videos, news stories, and so on. Many also have advanced search tools that let you limit your search to just one country, a certain time (the last day, week, month, year, or a range you specify).

Searching Within a Site

If there's a particular site that you know is reliable, most search engines will let you limit your search to just them. Just add the web address at the end of your search string, like this: *peanut butter cookie recipe flourless natural site:www.epicurious.com*. (Make sure not to put a space between site: and the web address). For large or popular sites you can just add the name of the site, like *peanut butter Wikipedia*.

You can also use a custom search that has been made to search just some websites. MediaSmarts has created two custom searches that you can use:

[Bit.ly/science-search](https://bit.ly/science-search) searches these science sites:

- Canadian Geographic
- Science News
- Science Daily
- Nature
- Scientific American
- New Scientist
- Science

[Bit.ly/news-search](https://bit.ly/news-search) searches these news sites:

- The Globe and Mail
- National Post
- Canadian Press
- Bloomberg Canada
- Reuters
- BBC
- The Washington Post
- American Press
- The Wall Street Journal
- The New York Times

