Googling More Effectively

The trouble with Google is that, although you know that the bit of information you want *must* be in there somewhere, it's not always easy to bring it to the top of the pile. Thankfully the Google engineers have provided lots of advanced tools to help us – but that's no good unless we're familiar with those tools. "RTFM!", you say? Well, yes, Google has provided us with lots of documentation, but unless you know that there are tools that are actually going to help you, you aren't going to invest the time in reading it.

(If you don't know the meaning of RTFM, you can always type *define:rtfm* into Google, and it will enlighten you. And straightaway some of you will have added a very useful Google tool to your armoury – you can ask Google to *define:* anything.)

Anyone can be a learner

In an article of this length, I can't rewrite Google's manuals – there would be no point. Rather, I shall give you a few "Did you know?" suggestions and hopefully, amongst all the "Yes, I knew that" responses there will be the occasional "Oh, I didn't know you could do that", in which case this article will have achieved its aim. If you then decide to RTF(online)M and find even more of Google's hidden gems, that'll be a bonus.

To make you feel more comfortable, let me start with a confession. For years I used Google and never once used the "I'm feeling lucky" button because I thought it would take me to an on-line casino! (If you don't know what it does, try typing *istc communicator* into the Google window and click on the aforementioned button.)

Using Google's Advanced Search

Personally, I don't! I find it a bit intimidating and I'm never quite sure what it's all about. In any case, having learnt some of the shortcuts and tricks that you can use from the keyboard, I find it much quicker to just type things into the normal Google window.

Back to basics

Before going any further, let me just check that you're happy with a few of the basics. If I type *istc communicator* into the Google window, I get 748 results, but if I use *"istc communicator"* – with the quotation marks – I only get 47. Why? Well, the latter search is asking for *only* those pages where the two words occur in that specific order. Without the quotes, you're just saying that the two words should occur somewhere – anywhere – on the page.

Another useful way of making your search more specific (for that's what using Google is all about, finding the *specific* piece of information you want) is to use the minus sign – well, it's the hyphen on the keyboard, but it carries the idea of 'take away'.

So, try giving Google *istc* to look up: 1.6 million finds, and most seem to be about a different ISTC, so try instead using *istc -student*, and there is the society's website as the number one Google find. Mind you, the number of finds is only down to 1.4 million, because there are an awful lot of ISTCs in this world. (Actually, Google fails here. Using *define:istc* only comes up with the Iron & Steel Trades Confederation, whereas *http://www.acronymfinder.com/* comes up with 46 different ISTCs!)

Site: a powerful command

Next to *define:* I think that *site:* is my most-used command. So, for example, if I want information on last year's conference, I can use *conference 2005 site:istc.org.uk* to get Google to look it up for me. (If I can't remember the exact form of the ISTC web address, I can use *inurl:istc* which will look for pages on any website that contains 'istc' as some part of the URL.)

But the use of *site:* goes way beyond its usefulness for searching specific websites. Suppose that you want to limit your search to UK websites? Well, supposedly, clicking on 'pages from the UK' in the screenshot above will do that, but you still get American sites amongst them. Adding *site:uk* to your search restricts the search to only pages with .uk at the end of the URL. And, of course, by the same token, you can home in on, say, German websites with *site:de*, etc.

Here are a few more suggested targets:

site:ac.uk	UK universities & colleges
site:gov.uk	UK government
site:edu	US universities
site:mil	US military
site:gov	US government

University challenge

Searching UK university websites is easy with *site:ac.uk*, but what about universities in other countries? Well, you can do the same for certain other countries such as Germany (edu.de) or Belgium (ac.be). Unfortunately some countries have chosen naming conventions that are not hierarchical. For example, French university websites are of the form univ-rouen.fr, and Italy has chosen names like unito.it, uniba.it etc, so there's no way of grouping them.

But you can, in fact, get at the French universities by using *site:fr inurl:univ*. This works because the 'univ' in 'univ-rouen' counts as a 'word' within the URL. Unfortunately, it doesn't work for Italy because 'unito' and 'uniba' are separate and different words.

I've had success with Australia (edu.au), New Zealand (ac.nz) and Poland (edu.pl), but others such as Canada, Italy, Norway, and Sweden seem to have no name standardisation at all.

Other facilities

Suppose you want to find a company's phone number, and suppose you've searched and found the address of their website. You then type *site:acme.co.uk ~phone* into Google. The tilde (~) in front of 'phone' means 'any word like...', so it will find any pages on that company's website that contain words like phone, telephone, call, calling or mobile.

In my work with non-English authors (writing in English) I sometimes get place names and people's names containing underline characters, e.g. Le_ajsk. This is because what was a special (non-ASCII) character has been lost in transmission. So, how do I find the missing letter? I simply guess what it might be and see what Google thinks. So, if I think that this Polish place name might be Lesajask, I type it into Google which rewards me with only 25 finds, but it very helpfully says, 'Did

you mean: Lezajsk' (sic: no question mark!), but Lezajsk is underlined as a link – click on it and I get 1.1 million finds, so that's good enough for me.

You can use this 'ask the audience' technique when you can't begin to think how to spell a particular word. So, if I type in *numoania*, Google rightly asks whether I mean *pneumonia*. But be careful! If you type in *diarea*, Google will give you *diarrhea* (so to speak!) which, of course, is the American spelling.

But another caveat here is that not all web pages spell things correctly – for example, if I type in the incorrectly spelt *"neville shute"* Google finds 803 pages. In this case, it would be worth trying variations: *"nevile shute"* give 102 pages and *"nevil shute"* 44,100.

Quick tricks

Finally, here are a few quick tricks that you might find useful:

Phone numbers – If you have a phone number and would like to know which part of the country it represents, just type in, say, *01633*, and a quick flick through the summaries of the web pages it finds will soon tell you that's Newport (Gwent).

Postcodes – Similarly, if you have an address and you're not sure which part of the country it's in, if you type in the first half of the postcode, you'll soon find out. NR13? That's Plumstead/ Rackheath, near Norwich.

ISBN numbers – Do you want to check an ISBN number? Just type, say, *0718131797* into Google and you'll find that it's Dick Francis, "The Edge", but if you get just one digit wrong, you'll know immediately – *"0718131787 did not match any documents"*.

Quotations – What if you want to check a quotation? Type in *"picks up the * in the * where her wedding has been"* and the internet will fill in the blanks. (You may notice that two of the pages seem to think that the song is about someone called "Ella Marigby"!)

Bible references – If you want to know, for example, what Acts 13:16 says, just type in *Acts 13:16* – it's as simple as that.

Weights and measures – If you type into the normal Google window *76 inches in metres*, it will tell you that that it's 1.93 metres. (Be careful if you use it for liquid measures – if you just say *gallons*, it will assume that you mean US gallons, so have type, say, *35 litres in imperial gallons*.) This is actually a calculator, I can type, say, *6.3*5+17*9.3* and it will give me 189.6. I can even enter *51 weeks 3 days 9 hours in seconds* and it will; tell me it's 31,136,400 seconds to my next birthday!

More information

Google is a massive massively powerful search tool – I've only scratched the surface here – so here are some URLs that might give you some more ideas:

http://www.google.co.uk/help/operators.html
http://www.google.co.uk/help/features.html
http://www.google.co.uk/options/index.html
http://www.google.com/help/calculator.html

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