

Two quick tips for searching Google on the enquiry desk

When confronted with a queue of six people at the enquiry desk and an internet search result of 250,000 hits you may well reflect that using the internet to answer that quick reference enquiry was not such a good idea after all.

Ironically, access to vast storehouses of information has complicated our jobs as much as it has simplified them. Pressing a few keyboard keys does not necessarily deliver. Here are two practical tips that my library and information students find work remarkably well and will potentially revolutionise your searching for quick reference type enquiries. It is not the only way of searching but it is certainly an effective way to dramatically reduce the number of hits without losing relevance.

Thinking like a librarian (structures, key words, Boolean algebra) is very useful when dealing with a traditional online host that has its information nicely indexed in searchable fields. However, the internet is still essentially a string of text (although there are some librarian-friendly controlled parts) where we are missing a trick if we simply use key words and, in the case of Boolean, allow the ambiguities inherent in language to reduce some potential precision in our quick reference enquiries. Detailed research topics respond well to keywords, quick reference topics not so well.

The key orientation for effective quick reference internet searching is to think like a journalist rather than as a librarian.

What does this mean in practice? Well, consider the following request:

“I want to know how to wire a plug”.

It’s very tempting to start the search by identifying key words. On such an approach you might consider *plug wiring* or *wiring plug*, both of which, in Google for instance, will bring you back a significant number of hits. You’ll get there eventually. Is the customer getting impatient yet?

Unfortunately the early hits are very technical and not the kind of information helpful to anyone who simply wants to know which wires go where in his or her domestic three pin plug. So how can we make it more specific and relevant to the type of use to which the information will be put?

The first thing to recognise is that keywords do not carry enough information to make them specific. Words can be ambiguous in meaning or context.

So this gives us a first clue to more precise internet searching – think in sentences or phrases, not simply key words. Librarians tend to think in hierarchy and key words, journalists tend to think in text strings or phrases / sentences.

Why is this a clue to more effective internet searching? Well, consider the “wiring a plug” search. What the reader really wanted to know was *how to* wire a plug, not wiring and plugs. Why make it more

complicated by assigning key words? The following phrase (it's really just a string of text) put into Google's search box will deliver excellent, precise returns in its first page of results.

"How to wire a plug" ("wiring a plug" is good too)

(remember to use quote marks so it will be treated as one text string),

At the phrase level this carries more than the meaning of the individual words – the context matters for greater precision. The search results are consistently practical and relevant because of the use of the words "how to" (As a general point here "how to" is an excellent start to any search for a practical subject. Why? Because practical articles are quite often written with titles which include the words "how to". For confirmation of how well this works try this form of words for items on "how to eat with chopsticks").

However there is even more sophistication in this sentence/phrase-rather-than-keyword approach. My second clue to effective quick reference searching is to *use only part sentences* (grammar is one of the most effective search filters we have).

On first reading that probably doesn't make a lot of sense. It makes more sense to do it than to think about it. Try the following:

"Opened the National Exhibition Centre" (*will deliver the answer to "Who opened the National Exhibition Centre?"*)

"Miro was born on" (*will deliver the answer to "When was Miro born?"*)

"is the smallest church in London" (will deliver the answer to "What is the smallest church in London?")

"was the first Emperor of Japan"(will deliver the answer the question "Who was the first Emperor of Japan?")

My students are usually very impressed when they use this approach to searching. Have we got the dream ticket to answering quick reference enquiries here? In front of your eyes you will see:

- The answer. You don't even have to click on to the websites from the Google results page because the part sentence you used is highlighted and forms part of each Google search hit display
- A number of similar hits to confirm general agreement, or otherwise amongst sources – an aid to quality control (sometimes this can be very useful too when there are potentially competing claims to part sentences such as "is the fattest man in the world")
- Not much, if any, "noise". The results are very specific (in effect the sentence grammar has been very useful here)
- Hey this was quick! And manageable on a busy enquiry desk!

By all means use Boolean algebra and key words to search but if you are looking to find a quick way to get the results up on the page in front of you without having to click on to websites to scan their pages then give the part sentence method a try. It's worth it, especially

when one of the biggest barriers to using the internet on the enquiry desk is the time that searching and subsequent scanning takes.

Internet searching is as much a creative activity as it is a science. For effective quick reference enquiry searching remember the two tips: think first in sentences and phrases, not keywords and Boolean; part sentences will naturally deliver your answer when the sentence begins or ends with your answer.

And of course, if this doesn't work try keywords and Boolean!

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