

The Genealogist's Google Search Methodology

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In this session we'll cover the methodology for using Google for your genealogy research. We will walk through the process, provide you with the tools, and give with real-life examples of Googling success. You will be inspired to revisit using Google for your online searches and armed with the latest strategies to do so successfully.

1. Understand the Science Behind Google

- Web Crawling - 24/7 indexing of websites
- Caching - copies of websites
- Google takes your instruction literally, so be clear about what you want

2. Let the Past Aid in the Present: Web History

When you search using Google.com, Google strives to provide the best possible results. To do that, they consider your past Google search activity when prioritizing your results. This is done through Web History. If you regularly search for genealogy topics, that will influence your future results lists.

You must have a free Google account to take advantage of Web History. However, you can turn it off if you don't want your searches tracked. To see your account history:

1. Go to <http://www.Google.com/accounts>
2. Sign in (or create a free account if you haven't already)

If you're visiting a webpage or performing a search that you don't want stored in your Google Web History, here is how to deactivate it:

1. Go to <https://myactivity.google.com/myactivity>
2. Click *Activity Controls*
3. Turn on the slider for *Web & App Activity*

3. Create a Plan of Attack

- Identify what you specifically want to find. Don't just search for a name. Ask yourself: If I walked into the Family History Library, how would I describe what I am looking for to the librarian? (Hint: you would provide specific details.)
- Identify what is uncommon about what you seek. Consider keywords that might be associated with the name such as a location, an occupation, an unusual given name of a relative, etc. Build these elements into your search to customize it.

4. Use the Right Tools for the Job: Search Operators

Employ and combine "operators" to achieve a manageable list of higher quality results:

Quotation Marks: Use with a “keyword” or “keyword phrase” to ensure that the keyword or phrase will appear in every result, exactly as you typed it.

OR: Use to give Google options. Example: “*John, Green*” OR “*Green, John*”

Asterisk (*): Holds the place of a character (initial), keyword, or short keyword phrase. Example: “*Lars * Larson*”

Minus Sign (–): Removes unwanted words or phrases from search results.

Examples:

John Lincoln –abraham –president

Abraham Lincoln –“civil war”

Numrange (..): Ensures that all results contain a year that falls within the range specified. Example: *1790..1830*

Operators can be **mixed and matched** as needed. There is no limit to search query length. Click the *Search Tools* button to further narrow your search results.

5. Analyze the Results

Internet searches rarely achieve the ideal results with the first search. There’s a lot to learn from search results that will improve your skills. Analyze the results you receive to determine which keywords are associated with unwanted websites. Employ the minus sign operator to remove them and run your search again. You will know you are becoming a sophisticated Googler when your search queries become longer, and you run multiple versions of the query before achieving the desired results.

Keep in mind the “exact science” of search. Google will take your query literally! Chances are if you are not getting the results you expected or hoped for, you need to revise what you are telling Google to search for (and not to search for).

Word order matters! Watch <http://youtu.be/xcUuNORncN0>

6. Expand into the Google Toolbox (Case Studies)

Putting it to the Test #1

Mercer Alton’s son Frank was born in 1892 in San Francisco. Unfortunately, his birth certificate was destroyed along with the courthouse in the Great San Francisco Earthquake of 1906. While you could pay for access to an alternative source such as a report of the birth in the newspapers, Google can dig up free alternatives if they exist.

Putting it to the Test #2

Google Scholar – <http://scholar.google.com>

While on vacation years ago Sue was told by a tour guide that she had done her thesis on Sue’s ancestor. What a coincidence! She didn’t get the guide’s name or phone number, but Google found her and the theses anyway.

Putting it to the Test #3

YouTube – <http://www.youtube.com>

Sunny had helped her husband's family climb their tree. They told her that unfortunately their family didn't have old home movies like her family was lucky to have. Little did she know that Google and YouTube could prove them all wrong.

7. Leverage Google's Strengths

RELATED: Search

Not all websites that discuss the same family have found each other or are linked to each other. But Google can determine the 'relatedness' of websites. RELATED search is conducted the same way as described above except you will substitute *RELATED:* for *LINK:*

Example: *RELATED:www.greatfamilyhistorywebsite.com*

This will return a results list comprised of the websites that most closely match the website you designated. It's like taking an entire website full of keywords and stuffing it into the Google search box. Google knows exactly which websites mention the same prominent keywords with the same level of frequency. The websites that top the results list are your best leads.

8. Put Google to Work for You: Google Alerts

You certainly don't want to lose all your hard work that you have put into crafting your search queries. Rather than creating dozens of sticky notes with your searches scribbled on them, save and automate your surname searches with Google Alerts.

How to Create a Google Alert for Your Search Query:

1. Make sure you are signed into your free Google account
2. Highlight and copy (Control+C) the search query from the Google Search box
3. Go to <http://www.google.com/alerts>
4. Paste your search query into the Search Query box on the Google Alerts page
5. Select the result type you desire (Example: *Everything, News, etc.*)
6. Select how often you wish to receive alerts (Example: *Once a Day*)
7. Select how many results you want to receive (Example: *Only the Best Results*)
8. Enter / Select the email address you want your alerts to be sent to
9. Click the CREATE ALERT button

Resources

The Genealogist's Google Toolbox 2nd Edition by Lisa Louise Cooke
Genealogy Gems Publishing, 2015 <https://www.shopgenealogygems.com/>