

From *World History Matters: A Student Guide to World History Online* by Kristin Lehner, Kelly Schrum, and T. Mills Kelly.

Using Search Engines Effectively

Browsing is very helpful when you are starting a project and do not have a specific resource or topic in mind. A well-designed website allows you to wander around large thematic or chronological sections, to see connections and groupings. When you do know what you want, however, a keyword search is sometimes the best path. *Google*, the most commonly used search engine, can be a powerful tool, especially once you understand how it works and how to use it wisely.

The first wave of search engines, such as *AltaVista*, *HotBot*, and *Excite*, were not very successful at discriminating between high-quality and low-quality websites. A poorly written website that mentioned the Holocaust fifty times might be mechanically ranked more “relevant” than an authoritative website from the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* [124] that mentioned the word only a dozen times on its home page. In the late 1990s, *Google* revolutionized the way search engines work, presenting a smarter search engine.

Google, for example, looks at the presence of keywords in the title and URL rather than searching meta tags, the hidden tags written by a website author to describe the contents of a webpage. The more significant development, however, built upon a unique element of the web itself — the ability to link to other websites. *Google* founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin found a way to use the popularity of certain websites to promote their rankings. A website on the Holocaust with twenty links to it from other websites was probably better than a site with one or two links to it. If in turn some of those other websites were “authoritative” (*i.e.*, they also had lots of links to them), so much the better for the first website’s ranking. In short, *Google* found a way to measure reputation on the web through a recursive analysis of the interconnectedness of the medium itself.⁴

Here are some additional tips for finding what you are looking for.

Use Quotation Marks Using quotation marks makes your search more specific by identifying multiple search terms as a specific phrase. If you enter the words *world history* without quotes, *Google* returns more than 800 million results. If you put the search term in quotes (“world history”) you have just narrowed it down to two and a half million. Entering the specific topic, time period, or region you are interested in exploring, such as “world history” “Latin America,” will narrow it still further.

⁴Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, “Building an Audience: Mass Marketing, Online and Off,” *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web*, University of Pennsylvania Press, <http://chnm.gmu.edu/digitalhistory/audience/2.php> (accessed July 16, 2007).

Use Advanced Search The easiest way to expedite your search and quickly move from millions of returns to hundreds or even dozens, is to use the Advanced Search feature. You can click on “Advanced Search” from the main search page or go directly to http://www.google.com/advanced_search. This allows you to narrow your search to specific languages, include or exclude words or phrases, restrict domain names, or define the location of occurrences (*e.g.*, the phrase occurs anywhere on the page, only in the title, or only in the text of a webpage).

Enter Multiple Terms If you are interested in the role played by American troops in the Boxer Rebellion, you’ll want to enter “boxer rebellion American troops,” since anything else might take you to a website on Mohammed Ali. The first website returned by the *Google* search engine in this search is the *Wikipedia* page on the Boxer Rebellion. The second website is from the National Archives and offers an article (secondary source) on the involvement of American troops in the Rebellion. The third choice is from the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), and includes the transcript of an interview with noted American diplomatic historian Walter LaFeber. The fourth is from *About.com* which simply republishes the content from *Wikipedia*. It is not until you get to the ninth choice in the *Google* search that you finally have access to primary sources, in this case drawn from the collections of the U.S. Navy.

Tell Google Where to Find It If you know that you saw a sixteenth-century map of Casablanca on the website *Historic Cities: Maps and Documents* [60] but you do not remember how you found it, you can type your keyword and the URL “casablanca site:historic-cities.huji.ac.il” into a *Google* search and the map will be your first hit. If you remember that the title of a website you visited included the words “digital,” “Islamic,” and “project” you can type “intitle:digital islamic project” to quickly find the *Ahlul-Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project* [31].

Other such operators include *intext:*, *allintext:*, *allintitle:*, *inurl:*, *author:*, and *location:*.

Use the +, -, |, and ~ Signs It is also possible to limit the results of a *Google* search by using special characters. If you are interested in listening directly to the words of Agatha Christie or Salmon Rushdie, you might search for “Agatha Christie” + “audio” or “Salmon Rushdie” + “audio” to quickly find their interviews on *BBC Audio Interviews* [131]. The minus sign (-) means *not* and the solid vertical line (|) substitutes for *or*. So if you are searching for information on the John Scopes trial, you might try “John Scopes | monkey + trial” because the trial was also called the “Monkey” trial. Or, if you wanted search results that *excluded Wikipedia*, you would use “John Scopes | monkey - wikipedia” to access more carefully selected search results. If you are not sure about different names for the same thing, try using the synonym search. Using the (~) symbol in your search returns the term you are looking for *and* any synonyms of that term.

Translate a Text Although a rough translator at best, *Google* can give you the “gist” of an article or website in a number of languages, including Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Portuguese, or Spanish. See http://www.google.com/language_tools for this feature. Beware, however, that free, online translations are often imperfect.

Link Check An additional tool for assessing the reliability of a website is investigating which other websites and organizations find it valuable. Run a “link check” on *Google* by typing “link” and the complete URL into the *Google* search field as follows:

link:<http://www.giftsofspeech.org>

The link check on *Gifts of Speech: Women’s Speeches from Around the World* [140], created by Sweet Briar College, yields 165 items. This means that more than 150 websites link directly to this archive. Even more promising, many of these links come from library, teaching, and university websites, indicating that an academic audience has favorably reviewed this website.

Other Searches Did you know that you can find a current map by typing an address into *Google* or using *Google Maps*, <http://maps.google.com>? You can also find out what a word means by asking *Google*. For example, you can find out the two possible meanings of *portmanteau* by entering “define:portmanteau.” You can convert measurements or make a calculation with *Google*. Type “9000/4” and *Google* will return the answer “2250.” Type “35 degrees Celsius in Fahrenheit” and you will receive “95 degrees Fahrenheit.”

Other Search Engines When searching for information on current events, you may want to search directly on media websites such as the *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>, or the *British Broadcasting System*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk>. Both offer broad coverage of current events, although access to archived articles is not free. You can also try other search engines such as *Metacrawler*, <http://www.metacrawler.com>, and *Vivísimo*, <http://www.vivisimo.com>. Keep a library of “favorites” or “bookmarks” with search engines or websites that you use frequently for research.