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A Baker's Dozen of Tips for Better Web Searches

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A Baker's Dozen of Tips for Better Web Searches

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I. Introduction

The American Bar Association reported that 90% of respondents to its 2019 tech survey use free online resources to conduct legal research, with 65% reporting frequent use and 25% reporting occasional use.¹ Search engines are an important piece of the free legal research toolkit, and given the value of attorneys' time, maximizing the efficiency of web searching is paramount. This paper aims to provide tips and strategies for crafting effective web search queries as well as providing suggestions for resources useful for specific purposes. The emphasis herein is on Google's advanced searching features because of that search engine's popularity, but most other general search engines allow for similar search strategies to increase efficiency and relevancy in retrieving results.

II. The Tips

#1. Can I Quote You?

Surrounding a string of words with quotation marks is the most common way to accomplish phrase searching, with Google, Bing and Yahoo all recognizing quotation marks as searching for an exact phrase.

Google also recognizes quotation marks around a single word as requiring all results to contain that specific form of the word. For example, a search for **childcare** will retrieve results containing either **child care** or **childcare**, whereas a search for "**childcare**" will force each result to contain the term in the form **childcare** at least once.

¹ Nicole L. Black, *The Legal Research Tools Lawyers Are Using in 2020 and Beyond* (Jan. 17, 2020), LLRX, <https://www.llrx.com/2020/01/the-legal-research-tools-lawyers-are-using-in-2020-and-beyond/>.

#2. Smooth Operators

Users of legal research databases such as Westlaw and Lexis are familiar with Boolean operators, including AND, OR, Not, and proximity indicators. Google and Bing also allow for connecting terms with operators for more precise searching.

- A space between search terms = **AND**.
- Google ignores the word **or** unless it is capitalized; with a capitalized **OR**, it treats the connected terms as alternatives meaning the results can contain *either* term. Bing also recognizes the capitalized **OR** connector.
- The minus sign placed before a word instructs Google to eliminate results containing that word. **Vikings –football –team** should produce results about the seafaring raiders rather than the sports team, and a search for **RICO –Puerto** should exclude many irrelevant hits from a search for sites about the racketeering statute. Bing currently uses the minus sign or the capitalized **NOT**. Caveat: use the minus sign or NOT limiter carefully as you may unwittingly eliminate relevant sites from your results.
- Proximity operator: in Google, use **AROUND(X)** between two words to return results containing those words within the specified number of words from each other. For example, **John AROUND(2) Kennedy** retrieves results including **John F. Kennedy, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, John Kennedy, or Kennedy, John.**

#3. Learn Your Limits

In addition to the above operators, Google provides numerous ways to limit and filter your search results. At the front end, your search query can instruct Google to only

return results from a certain domain (e.g., .edu), or of a certain file type (e.g., .pdf). One of the easiest ways to take advantage of these limiters is to use the Google Advanced Search boxes at https://www.google.com/advanced_search. At present, Google's Advanced Search provides boxes for limiting by language, region, date site updated, site or domain, where in the page the terms appear, file type, and type of licensing or rights.

Combining a terms and connectors search with a few limiters could pare down a results list to manageable size, with Google's algorithm tossing the most relevant results near the top.

#4. The Sharpest Tool

Another option is to use Google's post-search filters to refine results. After running your search, look for the link to Tools at the top of your results. The two options involve time and type of results.

- The time filter tool allows you to choose results from pages updated in the past hour, day, week, month, year, or within a custom date range.
- The results filter tool allows you to select **verbatim** which will eliminate results that Google included due to corrected spelling, personalization due to a searcher's previous searches, and related pages.

#5. #searchsocialmedia

Google may not be the best tool for searching social media, but for a quick search using this familiar tool, place a **hashtag #** or the **at symbol @** in front of a string of characters. For example, Google searches of **#ugalawlibrary** or **@ugalawlibrary** both quickly find the Twitter, Facebook and Instagram accounts of the University of Georgia Law Library as well as blog posts and other social media accounts referencing the law library's social media presence.

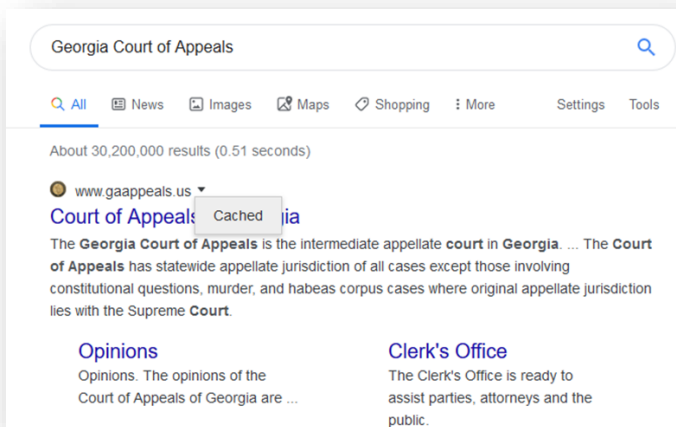
#6. Go Waaaayback

Google Cache

Frustrated by a temporary web site glitch? Try Google's cache feature to access a snapshot of that site taken at an earlier time. This can be useful when a site is temporarily not responding or is loading too slowly.

Find the cached version of a site by clicking on the dropdown arrow next to the site's name in the list of Google results.

Here, I am accessing the cached version of the Georgia Court of Appeals web site.



Wayback Machine on the Internet Archive

The problem, and solution, are different when you seek an earlier version of a site or are on the hunt for content that has been removed or overwritten. The Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/> is a nonprofit organization providing access to over 330 billion pages of archived web sites from 1996. To view an older version of a web site, simply enter the URL in the site's Wayback Machine text box. In addition to archiving regular web pages, the site also captures images, books, movies, music and software (one of the

more popular collections is the Internet Arcade which is a web-based library of arcade (coin-operated) video games from the 1970s-90s, emulated in JSMESS software).

As of January 17, 2020, the Internet Archive included:

- 330 billion web pages
- 20 million books and texts
- 4.5 million audio recordings (including 180,000 live concerts)
- 4 million videos (including 1.6 million Television News programs)
- 3 million images
- 200,000 software programs²

The Internet Archive reluctantly provides a standard affidavit authenticating printouts from the Wayback Machine for a prepaid fee; however, they “ask that you please seek judicial notice or simply ask your opposing party to stipulate to the documents' authenticity” before asking them for such authentication.³

#7. It's Not Just Google

An additional strategy used by savvy researchers is employing alternative search engines, directories or other search tools when a Google search is not successful or when a specific type of tool is likely to be more effective.

Bing www.bing.com is one of the most well known alternative to Google. Microsoft launched Bing in 2009, and it continues to be a viable internet search tool. One key to its survival is the prevalence of Microsoft Windows on devices, many of which direct users to Bing for internet searches.⁴

Yahoo Search <https://search.yahoo.com/> is another popular search engine with a long history by internet standards. It currently uses the Bing algorithm to power its searches.

² ABOUT THE INTERNET ARCHIVE <https://archive.org/about/> (last visited Jan. 17, 2020)

³ THE INTERNET ARCHIVE'S POLICY FOR RESPONDING TO INFORMATION REQUESTS <https://archive.org/legal/> (last visited Jan. 17, 2020).

⁴ Mark Irvine, *Who Uses Bing, Anyway? 10 Surprising Ways You Probably Do*, THE WORDSTREAM BLOG (Nov. 19, 2019), <https://www.wordstream.com/blog/ws/2019/11/19/who-uses-bing-anyway>

Wish you could search them all at the same time? Metsearch engines allow searchers to run one query across multiple search engines and compile the results. Examples include Dogpile.com and Excite.com. Note, however, that most metasearch engines only include a certain number of results from each search engine used.

#8. Privatize

Google's privacy policy is available at <https://policies.google.com/privacy> and covers the information Google collects, how long it retains that information, how it shares that information, and what kind of control users can exercise over their personal information.

Bing's privacy policy <https://privacy.microsoft.com/en-US/privacystatement> also allows users some control over the information gathered, retained and shared.

Note that private mode in a browser does not mean that Google or Bing will not gather search data.

Concerns with the information gathered, retained and shared by Google and Bing may lead searchers to seek other search engines. **DuckDuckGo** continues to be a favorite of privacy-seeking web searchers. DDG promises that it will block hidden trackers and encrypt connections to keep your searches private and that it will never store or sell your information.

MetaGer and SearX are both privacy-respecting metasearch engines. MetaGer currently runs searches across around 50 search engines, and SearX is accessing over 80. SearX will direct the searcher to cached versions of sites in search results, when possible, to eliminate the necessity of visiting the actual sites, further protecting the searcher's privacy.

#9. Lost in Translation

Find a site in a language you do not read? Simply typing the word **translate** into the Google search bar brings up a text box that automatically detects the original language of the input text and produces a machine translation into the default language of the searcher.

For a larger text box and more options, go to Google Translate at <https://translate.google.com/>. This service translates words, phrases, entire web pages and documents between over 100 languages.

Documents in the following formats can also be uploaded for translation: doc, .docx, .odf, .pdf, .ppt, .pptx, .ps, .rtf, .txt, .xls, and .xlsx.

As with any automated translator, Google Translate is useful for getting the gist but cannot be relied upon to provide a sophisticated translation.

#10. Throw It into Reverse

Use Google Reverse Image Search at <https://images.google.com/> to identify images either found online or saved on your computer. Click on the camera icon in the search box for the option to enter the URL of an online image or to upload a saved image.

Bing also provides for reverse image searching. Look for the camera icon within the search box at <https://www.bing.com/images/> for the same options as Google.

On your mobile device: the Google Lens feature in the Google app similarly allows you to select an item in your photo library and Google will attempt to match it with similar images online.

Also on your mobile: the Chrome browser for iOS and Android provides for reverse image searching within a web site: press and hold an image until a pop-up menu

appears, with options with options including open image, save image, copy image, and “Search Google for this Image.”

#11. Get Scholarly

Google Scholar searches for articles, theses, books, abstracts and court opinions, from academic publishers, professional societies, online repositories, universities and other web sites.


If searching for court opinions in Google Scholar, check the box next to Case Law under the search box. The search form then allows the researcher to limit the results to federal court decisions or to those from specified states. Google Scholar also serves as a citator by listing in the sidebar the cases which subsequently cite the displayed case.

Google’s inclusion of the following disclaimer

Legal opinions in Google Scholar are provided for informational purposes only and should not be relied on as a substitute for legal advice from a licensed lawyer. Google does not warrant that the information is complete or accurate.

leads to a similar statement here: do not assume that the results include all relevant case law on a specific legal issue! This collection should serve solely to give the researcher an idea of the law or to help locate a specific case.

Searchers activating the My Library function in Google Scholar can easily save search results for easy retrieval in the future.

A dropdown menu accessible from the menu icon  in the upper left corner allows searchers to choose an abbreviated advanced search function in Google Scholar.

#12. Dive into the Deep End

This paper focuses on the surface internet, or that piece of the web that is crawled and indexed by search engines like Google, Bing and DuckDuckGo. Despite the billions of pages indexed by these traditional search engines, they only provide access to about 10% of the overall content in the internet.⁵ A tremendous amount of content is not accessible with these standard search engines, including documents loaded in databases, directory information, statistical data, and, of course, content stored behind a paywall. This kind of content may be findable with a specialized search engine, portal or directory. For example, Google Scholar (see Tip # 11 above) and Web of Science are frequently listed as a specialized tools for for finding academic content in the deep web. Government portals such as Govinfo.gov and Data.gov are also paths to some of this more buried content.

An excellent research guide listing a number of specialized search engines, portals, directories for finding deep web content is maintained at <https://guides.lib.uw.edu/c.php?g=342031&p=2300192>.

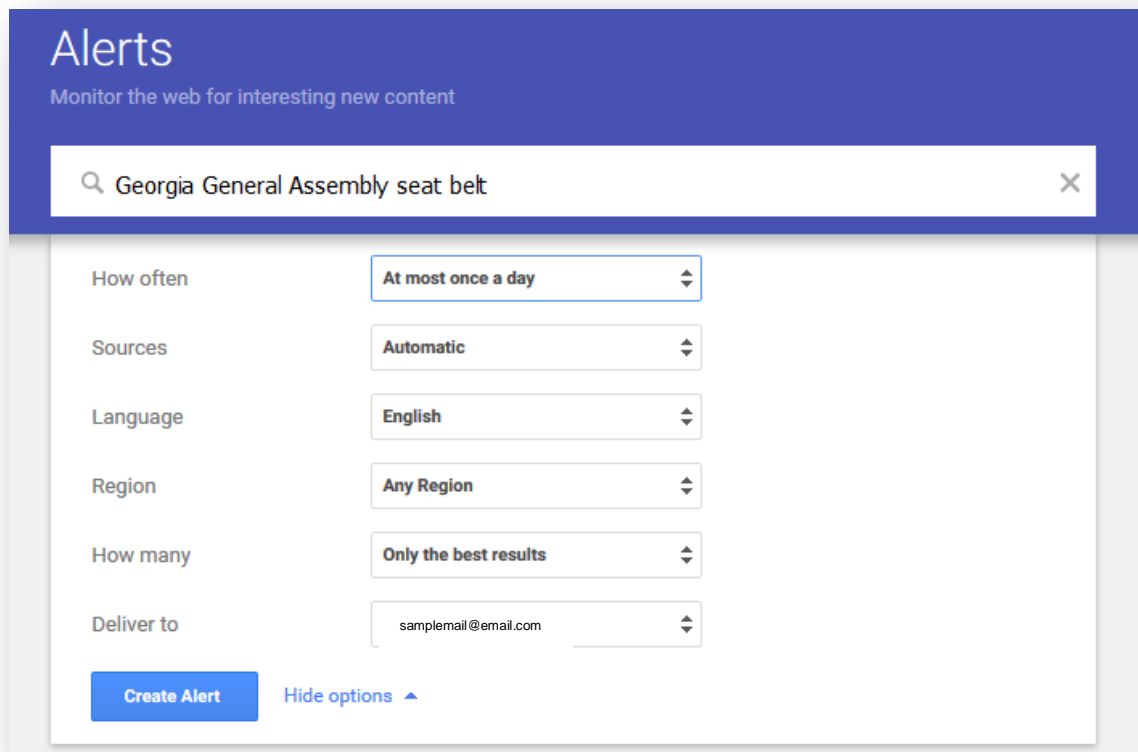
Searching the Dark Web, or the seedy, criminal side of the web, is beyond the scope of this paper, but does warrant brief mention. You may have legitimate reasons for needing to search the Dark Web; for example, perhaps you seek evidence of identity theft or stolen company information. Proceed into the land of The Onion Router (TOR) and Silk Road with caution! Tech Republic provides a brief list of helpful tips on navigating the Dark Web safely at <https://www.techrepublic.com/article/how-to-safely-access-and-navigate-the-dark-web/>.

⁵ *What is the difference between the Surface Web, The Deep Web and the Dark Web?* PINK HAT TECHNOLOGY MANAGEMENT (Dec. 4, 2017), <https://www.pinkhattech.com/2017/12/04/what-is-the-difference-between-the-surface-web-the-deep-web-and-the-dark-web/>

#13. Be Alert

Use Google Alerts to monitor the web automatically for new content meeting your search criteria. Log into your Google account and create your alert at <https://www.google.com/alerts>. You can specify for the email notifications to arrive as they-happen or on a daily or weekly schedule.

Here, I am setting up an alert that will run my search and, if any new results are detected, send me an email at most once per day.

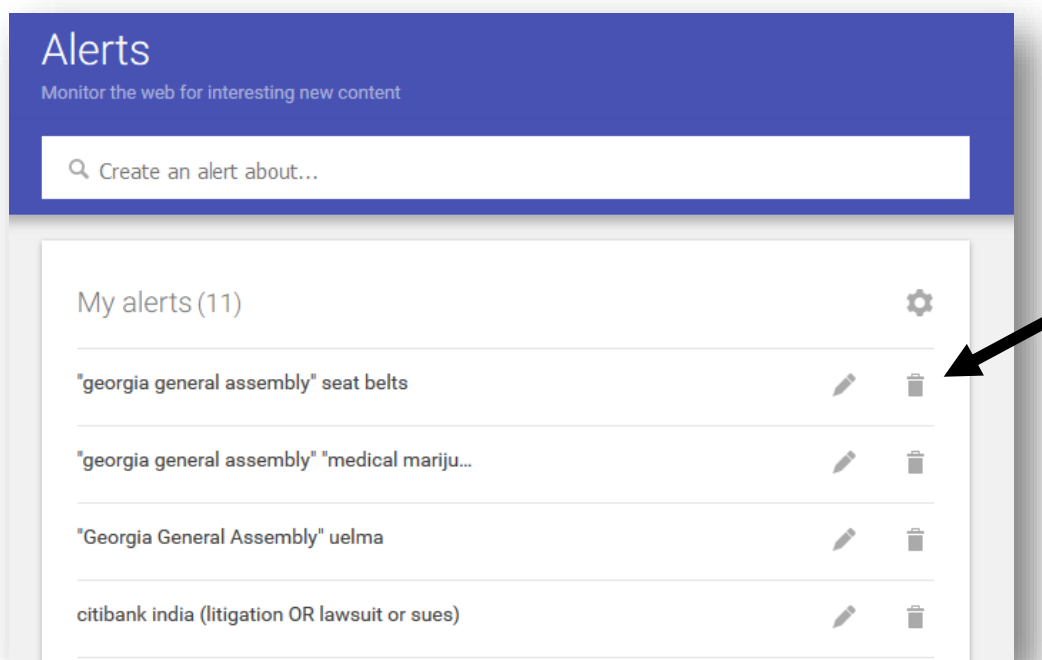


The screenshot shows the Google Alerts configuration page. At the top, the word "Alerts" is displayed in white on a blue background, with the subtitle "Monitor the web for interesting new content" below it. A search bar contains the text "Georgia General Assembly seat belt" with a magnifying glass icon on the left and a close button (X) on the right. Below the search bar, there are several settings, each with a label on the left and a dropdown menu on the right:

- How often:** At most once a day
- Sources:** Automatic
- Language:** English
- Region:** Any Region
- How many:** Only the best results
- Deliver to:** samplemail@email.com

At the bottom left, there is a blue button labeled "Create Alert". To its right, there is a link labeled "Hide options" with a small upward-pointing triangle icon.

Return to the Google Alerts page for easy editing or deletion of your search queries.



III. Conclusion

Realistically, most searchers, including busy lawyers, are content to type a few keywords into the Google search box and see what they get. The author of this paper is no exception. However, when a quick Google search turns up poor results, remember these tips and tricks for refining a search, and also keep a few of the alternative tools in your back pocket when Google falls short.