

Seven Ways to Save Time Searching

How much time out of your busy day do your searches take? Do you find yourself running the same searches over and over? Do you feel like you'll never keep up with all the great resources available on the Internet?

I've got news for you: you won't. But that's okay. There are so many great resources on the Internet that you don't have to keep up with absolutely everything. Try out these seven tips for saving time while searching, and you'll find that you can get more done in less time.

1. Use the right search engine -- Choosing the right search engine is the first step. If you're searching a general topic, like a famous person, event, or place, use a searchable subject index like Yahoo's Directory (<http://dir.yahoo.com/>) or the Open Directory Project (<http://www.dmoz.org>). If you're looking for more detailed information, like a certain aspect of an illness or specific statistics, try a full-text search engine like Google (<http://www.google.com>) or Teoma (<http://www.teoma.com/>).

And of course remember that there are specialized search engines out there that might make more sense for you. For current event searching, Google's Web search can work well, but there are also news search engines. RocketNews (<http://www.rocketnews.com/>) and Findory (<http://www.findory.com/>) are just two.

Another hint: don't forget that the search engines themselves also have specialty search offerings. Google has everything from Google Images (<http://images.google.com/>) to Uncle Sam, which allows users to search US government pages (<http://www.google.com/unclesam>). Yahoo has a variety of special searches, including image and video search from its AltaVista property (<http://www.altavista.com/image/default> and <http://www.altavista.com/video/default>) and

audio from its AlltheWeb property (<http://www.alltheweb.com/?cat=mp3>).

2. Focus. Focus. Focus. Use special syntax -- You can save time by using special syntax offered by the search engines. Are you trying to get more results from educational sites? Add `site:edu` to your Google or Yahoo search. Are you trying to get in-depth information on a particular subject? Add that subject's keyword or keywords to a title search (rose cultivation? No problem: `intitle:rose intitle:cultivation` .) Use a search engine's advanced search form, or its help pages, and experiment with special syntax. Even when you have only general keywords with which to search, using special syntax will narrow down your search results remarkably, saving you a lot of time.

And don't think that only full-text search engines have special syntax. Yahoo's directory includes a syntax that will let you narrow down your search to just a title (`t:`). Search for `Miami` and then search for `t:Miami`. See the result count difference?

You can use the special syntax with a single search term, or you can combine syntax within a search. If you're looking for university agriculture pages on rose growing, a useful Google search would be `intitle:roses intitle:growing site:edu`. Only want to know about growing roses in Texas? You can add a keyword -- `Texas intitle:roses intitle:growing site:edu` .

It may take you a little while to get comfortable with special syntax, but it'll save you time in the long run.

3. Use monitoring services -- If there's a topic about which you have an abiding interest, don't try to do the search every day. Find a service to do it for you. Google offers a Google Alert service for its Web search in addition to its news search alerts; it's available at <http://www.google.com/webalerts>

and requires only an e-mail address.

Sometimes the sites you want to monitor don't offer handy services like this. In that case you have a couple of options. With some search engines, such as Google News and Feedster (<http://www.feedster.com/>), you can sort results by date. Search for what you're interested in and save the resulting URL (this only works for search engines which include the query words in the result URL). Then, either use software to monitor that page for changes (like WebSite Watcher) or use a service that monitors page changes (like WatchThatPage). You can see changes to the pages without having to run the searches yourself on a regular basis.

4. Use current awareness services as extra eyeballs

-- If you're trying to keep up in a general field of knowledge, subscribe to the online newsletters that cover the field. Don't try to keep up with it on your own. If you're doing legal research, reading LLRX and the TVC Alert will help a lot in staying updated on good legal sites.

5. People are also great search engines

-- Communities of people in mailing lists or online message boards are also great sources of information and pointers to new topics. Yahoo Groups (<http://groups.yahoo.com/>) has an astounding number of email discussion lists available, many with archives open to anybody. Google Groups 2 (<http://groups-beta.google.com/>) is much smaller (it's much newer!) but also offers a variety of groups and communities. Online mailing lists can really fill up your mailbox, but if you have topical interests it might be easier to skim a few mailing list digests instead of trying to winkle the latest resources or search results out of Google or Yahoo.

6. For quick looks, use the cache -- Just trying to get a quick hit of information -- a quote, a snippet, something like that? If you're using a search engine that offers caches of pages (Yahoo, Google, Gigablast) try viewing the cache instead of going to

the actual page. It's rare when I'm using Google that a page on the results list will load faster than Google's cache of it. And in Google's cached pages, the keywords that you searched for are highlighted, making it even quicker and easier to zero in on the information you want.

7. Consider RSS

-- Have you heard of RSS? Unlike HTML, RSS divides its content into clearly defined areas -- titles, descriptions, creation dates, and so on. That makes it very easy to run really focused searches. If you're searching on popular culture, or commentary on popular culture, try those search engines that index RSS feeds, like Feedster and BlogDigger (<http://www.blogdigger.com/>). You can sort your results by date and get something approaching a map/timeline of events and popular culture. Of course, the more well-known the event, idea, or icon you're trying to track, the more extensive the map will be!

Whether you're doing frequent quick searches on the Internet or monitoring topical information, there are ways you can cut down on your searching time and save it for other things. Like, more searching! -- *Written by Tara Calishain, author, Web Search Garage (Prentice-Hall, September 2004.)*

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