How to Search the Internet Like a Genealogist

Instead of going to the library, or traveling great distances to secure records, or waiting weeks and months to hear from correspondence, the internet has opened the opportunity of making research as close as your desktop. Census images are now online. One can post a query on a message board and begin a dialog with genealogists around the world within hours or instantly share research and photos, with a click.

Searching databases is just one part of the research you can do. Some sites provide

- Historical information
- Records such as census, birth, marriage and death records
- Leads to books and other materials available to help with your research.
- Free courses to help you learn fundamental to advance research issues
- Message boards where you post and view queries to genealogy questions
- Find links to free online forms, guides, publications, calendar conversion tools, translation tools, and many other useful tools that will help organize your research
- Family trees and histories

I use Google frequently to assist in genealogy research. Whether I am conducting a surname search, looking for an address, seeking an answer to a question, or looking for a particular database, Google provides accurate and relevant search results in seconds. The key to making Google productive for your research is knowing how to use the search engine to query for results. I will expand on this topic and provide ideas of how to search the internet like a genealogist.

We like to think that everything found on the web is accurate and true. However, you should always verify any genealogy information found on the web, no matter where you find it. The best way to verify information is to locate and research the source. Many databases include a list of sources, but sometimes you'll come across one that doesn't. In this case, look at dates and the type of information and ask yourself what type of source would provide that information.

Using Key Words and Controlled Vocabulary

A search statement consists of words and punctuation that are entered in the search box of a library catalog, article database or Internet search engine to find matching records. The simplest search statement is a single word. The first step to creating any search statement is building a list of search terms that describe your research topic as precisely as possible in language that the computer understands. Keywords and controlled vocabulary are two kinds of search terms.

Finding and using keywords

- Brainstorm to select the two or three most meaningful words that describe your research topic.
- Identify broader terms, narrower terms and synonyms.
- A good way to select keywords is to write a sentence that describes your research topic and select the important words to use as keywords.

Tip: You may wish to try different keywords or controlled vocabulary words if the first keywords you try get unsatisfactory results.

Tip: A good way to find controlled vocabulary search words is to try a keyword search first. From the results, pick out the most interesting references and look at the subject headings if given in those references. Then try a subject search using those exact subject headings.

Qualify Search Parameters with Boolean Operators

Boolean operators define the relationships between words or groups of words and are used to broaden or narrow a search. Boolean operators used to qualify search parameters include

- AND--Narrow the search and retrieve records containing all of the words it separates.
- OR--Broaden the search and retrieve records containing any of the words it separates. The '|' can be used instead of 'or' (e.g., 'mouse | mice | rat' is equivalent to 'mouse or mice or rat').
- NOT--Narrow the search and retrieve records that do not contain the term following it.
- ( ) --Group words or phrases when combining Boolean phrases and to show the order in which relationships should be considered: e.g., (mouse or mice) and (gene or pseudogene).

Using Boolean Operators in a String. Search queries containing several operators search in the following order:
- ( )
- NEAR
- NOT
- AND
- OR

Examples of when to use Boolean Operators. Consider using Boolean Operators as follows:
- Too many records on your topic. If you are retrieving too many records on your topic, try adding another search term with the connector AND.
- Too many records on unrelated topic. If you are retrieving too many records on an unrelated topic, try eliminating a word with the connector NOT.
- Too few records on your topic. If you are retrieving too few records on your topic, try adding another search term with the connector OR.

Maximizing website searches among database record collections

As you search the web, much of the data you seek will be gathered into websites like ancestry.com and rootsweb.com. These websites incorporate their own search engines to help you effectively explore their various database collections and assets. As you enter a website, the instinct is to type in the surname or individual you seek and hope you find a match. Take the time to find and review search query outlines that have been provided to help maximize their collections. Be aware that most web sites have aspects of their query logic that are unique to searching their collections which would not be effective in a Google search. The following are some of the most common query logic you will find in web sites serving up genealogical data:

Review the contents of the databases. Throughout the web, you will find many websites promoting and offering data collections with the same category headings. If you were to compare the collections side by side you would find portions of collections that are the same and unique to that website. Sometimes you will find the website does not have any data, but merely has a search engine that goes out to other websites and searches their databases.

Whatever the case, it is important to take time and review what makes up the content of the database and from where the sources come so you can understand the value of the databases, especially if you are getting ready to order a subscription such as with ancestry.com. By looking around, you may be able to find exactly what you are looking for on a free site.

Start broad and narrow your search. Start with a general broad search. Then based on the search results, use the search logic associated with the particular website search engine to narrow the search.

Starting with name. The search engine will first look for an exact name match followed by common variants, misspellings, and nicknames. For example, a search for "Bill Smith" might return
- "William Smith"
- "Wm Smith"
- "Bill Smyth"
- "B. Smith"

Filling in the blanks. When you are entering the data for your search, you must have at least the last name. The other fields can be blank. You don't have to fill in all the fields of your query.

Do not use titles. Do not enter titles (like Dr., Earl, or Queen) or suffixes (3rd, III, or Jr.). Just search for the name without the title and then check the results for the ones you want.

Use of quotation marks " ". Quotation marks are used in searches to denote that you are specifically looking for these words in this order. For example, you are looking for John Lee in Florida. In the query, enter John Lee Florida. Chances are you would receive all the Johns in Lee County Florida. By using quotations, you are able to make the search more targeted and avoid a lot of unwanted search results. The query now becomes "John Lee" Florida. The search will have results that include both John Lee and Florida.

By using quote marks you tell the search engine that you want the words surrounded in quotations to be in the exact order you have them.

Advance Search. Whenever possible, use the advance search option. The more information you are able to enter in the search criteria, the better results you are likely to receive. For example, adding a date to your search will help narrow the scope. Even if you don't know the year, an educated guess in the date field will improve your results. The following are a few suggestions of how to improve the advance search:
- Add a middle name if you know of one
- Add a birth and/or death year
- Add a birth and/or death place

Focus on Specific Databases. Every time a website like ancestry.com adds a collection of data, be it records of Mt Carmel Cemetery, Dayton County Census, or a state's marriage records, they are being grouped with like records. Sometimes the collections are kept as a separate database or folded in with other data. In either case, you are given the opportunity

to search within or among databases. After you complete your initial search, you may feel it prudent to narrow your search by focusing on one of these categories. Usually the choice can be made by clicking on a radial button or choosing from a dropdown box. The type of category groupings you will see include:

- Ancestry Name Search
- Census Records
- Birth, Marriage and Death Records
- Social Security Death Index
- Surname Indexes
- Passenger & Immigration Records
- Military Records
- Directories & Members Lists
- Family & Local Histories
- Newspapers & Periodicals
- Family & Local Histories
- Photos & Maps
- Court, Land & Probate Records

Advance Special Features. Within Advance Search in Genealogy websites, you will be presented with unique features that will help provide greater control in your query/search. A few of them include

+/- Years. This feature allows you to control the time frame in years to search for an ancestor. For example, you have entered "John Jones" and you know that he died approximately in 1861. You can enter 1861 and then check +/- years box in increments of 1, 2, 5, or 10 spread. If you choose 10 years, the search engine would look for "John Jones" from 1851 to 1871.

Exact Matches Only. You will usually find this feature as a check box. By checking this box, you will only be presented with results that match your criteria "exactly."

Location, Location, Location. Some of the website search engines allow you to narrow the search within location options such as in familysearch.org. The location option allows you to focus on a region and narrow down depending upon your knowledge. For example, start with a geographical region, narrow to country, and then to state, county, and city.

Soundex Search. As a genealogist, it is rare to find surnames spelled the same way as we go back in historical records. Soundex becomes a good tool to search for names that sound like the one you are seeking. For example, by entering Smith, using soundex option, you would receive results that included Smithe, Smyth, or Smythe.

Wildcard search using the asterisk " * " and the question mark "?". Many website search engines have incorporated the use of the asterisk " * " and the question mark

"?" to be used in your query. The Wildcards are effective when you are searching for names with alternate spellings.

Asterisk " * " Represents 0 to 6 characters. For example
- john* could return john, Johnson, johnsen, johnathon, or johns.

Anytime you use the " * " you must have at least 3 letters as part of your query. For example:
- Correct: Joh*
- Incorrect: Jo*

Back vs. Refresh. If you complete a search and use your browser's "Back" button to return to this page, you may have to use your browser's "Refresh" or "Reset" button to remove all of the previous queries.

Query Examples

John Smith
- Finds files that contain the word "John" or the Word "Smith" (or both)

"John Smith"
- Finds files where the word "John" immediately precedes "Smith"

"John Smith"~1
- Finds files where the word "John" precedes "Smith" by at most 1 word
- For example: John Smith, John Q. Smith, and John Wesley Smith.
- Use ~2 for a maximum of two words between John and Smith

"Smith John"
- Finds files where Smith immediately precedes John

"Smith John" not state: tn
- Finds all files where Smith precedes John EXCEPT those in the Tennessee directory

"Smith John" not (state: tn and county: roan)
- Finds all files where Smith precedes John EXCEPT those in the Roan County, Tennessee directory
- Notice the use of parentheses to indicate that both conditions have to be met to exclude the file. Also notice the colons and the 2 letter code for the state

smith and (lawyer attorney)
- Finds all files containing the word "Smith" and either the word "lawyer" or "attorney" or both

sm?th
- Finds files containing smith, smoth, smath, smyth, etc. Use for multiple wild cards. You cannot start a query with a ?, or a *, smith* is OK, but *smith will not work

"john smith" "mary jones"A3
- Use A to assign priorities followed by a number. This search finds files containing John Smith or Mary Jones and assigns a higher priority to Mary Jones. The higher the number, the higher priority

Google Quick Reference for Genealogists

If you just want a quick reference on how to conduct specific types of internet search, the following list provides the most common:

Search Google for ancestral village. Go back to Google, www.google.com, and search for your ancestral village. Be as specific as possible about location. Be sure to try Google for the country as well for example:
- google.ca for Canada
- google.sk for Slovakia

Search Google Books. Looking for a book? Try Google Books, books.google.com. This amazing resource contains entire digitized books and selected pages of many books that are under copyright.

Search in lower case. Google doesn't care, but some search engines are case sensitive: The search terms "ed james" gives results:
- Edjames
- Ed James
- Ed JAMES
- ED JAMES
- eD jAmEs

Don't sweat the punctuation. Google mostly ignores punctuation (comma, semicolon, periods and hyphens). Your search for tampa, florida (with the comma) and your search for tampa florida (without the coma) produce the same results. One exception: Google includes punctuation when searching for an exact phrase using quote marks: " ".

View "cached" images of pages no longer available. Have you ever received a "404 - This Page Not Found" message? Click the "Back" button to return to Google's search results list. Then click on the unavailable item's "Cached" link to view Google's archived snapshot of the long-gone page. Then copy & paste any useful content to a file on your PC.

Quickly search whole web pages. Stop manually reading through long web pages trying to find where your surnames are hiding. Use your web browser's "Find" function: Crtl-F (or for Mac users: Cmd+F) to efficiently search an entire page by jumping from occurrence to occurrence of the term you want to select. PDF documents also have a find (binocular icon) feature.

Quickly search whole web sites. If a promising web site lacks a search box on its home page, you don't have to manually search each page for ancestors. Google can look at all the pages of a web site in a single search. Example: "elijah james" site:www.rootsweb.com. It only works for the Visible Web.

Don't forget the invisible internet. Search Engines can see only the "Visible Internet." Most web sites that require you to use their own search box (e.g., www.Ancestry.com, www.FamilySearch.org, www.RootsWeb.com) are the "Invisible Internet" and must be searched individually.

Search for genealogy surname websites. Google can provide a list of genealogy web sites whose titles include your surname by using the All in the Title phrase: Example: allintitle. genealogy "Isaac Winston" finds sites with the word genealogy in the title (across the web site's top blue band) and in which the name Isaac Winston appears on any page.

Search phrases not just words. Search for a phrase using Quotes (" "). Example: searching for ebenezer jones (no quotes) gives 732,000 results, but searching "ebenezer jones" (with quotes) eliminates 98.5% of irrelevant results making the good stuff much easier to locate.

Search synonyms. Search synonyms using the Tilde character (~). Example: ~tombstone gets the same results as searching all these words:
- Tombstone
- Gravestone
- Headstone
- Monument
- Marker

Other helpful search terms:
- ~genealogy
- ~index
- ~biography
- ~surname

Use wildcard searches. Search unknown terms using Google's Wildcard Word (*). Search "john * adams" to see
- John Q. Adams
- John Quincy Adams
- John Jay Adam
- etc.

Use one or more asterisks to represent one or more missing words. www.AltaVista.com is different; it considers an asterisk (*) to be a Wildcard Character, cemeter* yields
- Cemetery
- Cemeteries

Search for missing text strings. Searching for janesville-wi produces results with any number of missing words, including,
- Janesville, WI,
- Janesville, Rock, WI
- Janesville, Rock Co., WI,
- Janesville, Rock County, WI

Target timeframes. Set a date range for your searches to exclude recent events. Example: 1750…1899 produces a list of web sites that include years (numbers, actually) between 1750 and 1899, inclusive, but omits sites mentioning only the 1900's.

Search for names - both forward and backward. Search names as phrases: forward and backward to also find reverse name listings. Example: search "mary sims" and also search "sims, mary" to find additional relevant results.

Force Google to include "ignored" words within results. For speed, Google automatically ignores many common words like a, the, he, she, how, when, where, and if. Ordinarily this is okay, but I and will can be meaningful to genealogists. The solution: enclose I in quotes: "arthur darrah I" or precede will with a Plus Sign (+): dunning +will.

Search for all likely aliases. Don't stop with a search for "hiram h. goode" He may have been indexed as
- Hiram Goode
- H. Goode
- H. H. Goode
- Hiram Howard Goode
- Howard H. Goode

For common surnames, add geographic or time restrictions. For example search using this single long search string of all the variations at once:
- "ira smith" OR
- "ira a. smith" OR
- "i. a. smith" OR
- "i.aaron smith" OR
- "aaron smith" chicago 1874..1938

Use minus sign " - " to exclude unwanted results (same as "NOT"). Exclude irrelevant stuff that crowd-out desired results by using the minus sign (-). Example: adding -ufysses to a search for grant removes 99.6% of the original 366 million hits. Be careful: -texas will exclude all sites with the word Texas, including sites that elsewhere contain your ancestors.

Use "AND" to get fewer results. To reduce the number of search results, use the restrictive term: AND (always capitalized). Note: Google assumes a space = AND. Example: Jones AND plano AND texas (the same as jones plano texas).

Use "OR" to get more results. Expand search results that are too few by using the limiter term: OR (always capitalized). Example: wilson maine OR utah will produce results of Wilson names found in Either Maine Or Utah.

Try the marriage combo plate. Search husband & wife surnames to increase relevant results. For example: search "william clinton" AND rodham. Understand that "william clinton" alone gives 241,000 hits; but by adding rodham you eliminate 99.7% of the initial results; the remaining 0.3% of results emphasize the Clinton marriage and family.

Find names that appear near one another. Google proximity search http://www.staqqernation.com/cqi- bin/qaps.cgi. Locates nearby names. Example: fill in the form: ewell and mullins within 3 words to find targeted web sites.

Use genealogical key words in your searches. Add genealogical terms to your surname search string and search repeatedly with different emphasis. Suggestions:
- Born
- Birth
- Died
- Death
- Married
- Marriage
- Buried
- Burial
- Cemetery
- List index
- Roster
- Genealogy
- Family
- History
- Surname
- Will
- Probate

The order of search terms is important. Search Engines apply priority to early words in your search string. Example: smith tombstone rock Wisconsin produces somewhat different results than rock tombstone Wisconsin smith.

Use your search engine's advanced search feature. Combine these search techniques into long, complex, but highly relevant search strings either manually, or click on the Advanced Search link at www.Google.com for help forms.

Search using a little A.I. (artificial intelligence). Get a menu of smart, pre-formatted searches to choose from by filling-in Google's FamilySearch form at www.rootsweb.com/~wircqs/GoogleSearch.html.

Repeat your searches using variations of your search terms. This is important: Searching the web is hard work; missing ancestors are often inaccessible - buried on page 200 of your search results. So, continuously revise and refine your search terms and re-search (repeat) with the aim of fewer than 200 hits with highly relevant sites in the top 10 to 20 results.

Repeat your searches using different search engines. No search engine has a complete index of the Internet. It pays to use more than one Search Engine. Consider trying
- www.Google.com
- www.AltaVista.com
- www.AllTheWeb.com
- www.Ask.com
- www.Vivisimo.com

Try searching with a meta-search engine. These are like Search Engines on steroids; they automate the simultaneous search of multiple search engines. The up-side is breadth of results, but the down-side is their inability to manage complex searches, because different search engines use different syntax and punctuation rules. Try
- www.Clusty.com
- www.Mama.com
- www.DogPile.com

Find links to a relevant site. Often, a productive site will have other valuable sites linked to it. Use Google to find a list of sites that link to a good site. Example: link:www.danishgenealogy.com.

Look up ancestors in a web directory. Google maintains a directory of web sites organized by category (e.g., genealogy). Search Google Directories for free at http://www.google.com/dirhp. Use genealogy synonyms & surnames in the search box. Example: ~genealogy "buchanan family".

Target ancestors hiding in (.GED) files. Most genealogy PC & Mac programs export files as GEDCOMs (.ged file format), so ask Google to look for ancestors inside highly relevant .ged files. Example: "maxey ewell" filetype:ged.

Let Google find (and translate) foreign language web sites. In the Google search page, click the search preferences link to include non-English language sites among your results and click, save preferences. Then go to the Google Translation Tool web site to download a button for your browser that translates 34 languages to English at the touch of a button.

Search Google books to find text from out-of-print books. Google is digitizing millions of books - many of which are no longer copyright protected and can be searched & read online for free at http://books.google.com. Use a surname & qualifier in the search box. Example, lamphier "king county, Washington" or "abiah cobb" ~genealogy.

Let Google know your most important search terms. Ever-helpful Google often produces results that match some, but not all your search terms. Using a plus sign immediately before your most crucial terms or phrase requires its inclusion in results. Example: +"adolph sendelbach" chicago OR "cook county" Illinois makes sure Adolph is in each search result, even if he's in Toledo rather than Chicago.

Don't let an imprecise location spoil a good search. When using a geographic search term, use all forms of the location, because the person who posted your information may have used abbreviations. Example: "clint eastwood" hollywood, "los angeles co" OR los angeles county" OR "los angeles" AND ca OR cal OR calif OR California. Remember if you don't search them all, you don't get all the possible results.

Use Google blog search to meet other researchers. Do a Google search of BLOGS (web logs) which are like public postings. Online blogs can be viewed for free at http://blogsearch.google.com. Use a surname, location limiter and genealogy synonyms in the search box. Example: Ewell Charlottesville ~genealogy.

Use Google image search to find photos, postcards & maps. A Google search of images indexed from web sites can find gold. Online images can be searched at http://images.google.com. Use a surname, location, or qualifier like postcard in the search box. Example: "onondaga county, new york" lithograph.

Try Google scholar search. Search historical society papers, journal articles and college thesis for ancestors. Scholarly searches are free at http://scholar.google.com. Use a name and location in the search box. Example: "ann mullins" golden Colorado.

Try Google news archives search. Search historical newspapers for ancestors' announcements, ships, companies, crimes, and events. Limited searches of OCR (computer aided transcriptions) are free at http://news.google.com/archivesearch. Images cost $. Try a name, location and date restriction in the search box. Example: boyd, mobile, alabama 1860..1890.

Use Google to define antiquated occupations, diseases or terminology. Google allows Define (define:) to identify the meanings of words and phrases. Example: search define: ague, to discover that Uncle Cyrus died of an illness with fever and shaking chills; or define: lapidary, to learn that Cyrus worked as a cutter and polisher of stones into gems.

Use Google's residential phonebook to find possible cousins. Use Google's Residential Phonebook (rphonebook) to locate phone numbers, addresses, maps and even aerial and street-level photos of homes of the people who share your surname in a geographic area. Example: rphonebook: watson, ames, iowa, or try: rphonebook: meyer 89121.

Use Google's business phonebook to find non-residential contact info. Use Google's Business Phonebook (bphonebook:) to locate phone numbers, addresses, maps and even aerial and street-level photos of businesses that relate to your ancestors in a geographic area. Example: bphonebook: baptist, boise, idaho.

Use Google map's address location and driving directions. Enter a complete address like 3760 n sycamore st miami fl into www.Maps.Google.com to get a detailed map (including a high resolution satellite option). Then, in the search terms field, add the phrase to 3413 ruger ave janesville wi to get detailed driving directions. Great for locating cemeteries.

Use Google street view to get snapshots of ancestral homes. As you may know, Google's camera- equipped cars are circling the U.S. and Western Europe, taking continuous 360 degree photos of neighborhoods. Use www.Maps.Google.com to locate an address. Then click Street View to call-up the photo image of the home.

Let Google alerts search while you sleep. Google Alerts (www.Google.com/alerts) is an automated, online tool that lets you build complex Google Searches and run that search continuously to look for new additions to the Internet. You are periodically alerted by email of new web info about your favorite sports team or your great aunt. Alerts are a neat service.

Try Google video search to find tutorials, travelogues and family stories. Use http://Video.Google.com to search for short videos of interest. Example: search ewell Virginia.

Major databases are as close as your library card
Many libraries also offer remote access to their various electronic offerings, such as Ancestry.com and HeritageQuest Online.

 "Remote access" is a process in which you can stay at home or at school or at any other location of your choice, use a computer with an Internet connection, and connect to the library's web site. Once logged in and verified, you can access remote databases that the library offers. In effect, the library's web site works as a "gateway." It verifies you as a library patron and tells the various subscriptions that you are a patron of that library.

You can then access exactly the same screens of information from home that you would see if you were seated in the library. You can also print the same screens of information to your own local printer.