

Searching

Conducting Internet Searches for Family History

Mastering search engine techniques can improve your results in finding information about your family on the internet.

Google and other search engines are wonderful tools for finding your ancestors on the Internet. But sometimes you may find more information than you can use. In this article, we'll discuss some of the more useful techniques that you can use in Google when you are working on your family history.

Overall Strategy

Using Google often requires that you do several searches, refining your keywords as you go. When you look for someone with a common name, you need to refine your search more than when you look for someone with an unusual name. For example, you would refine a search for John Anderson more than you would for Heinrich Jashelski.

Here is a suggested process:

1. Start with a broad search so that you do not miss anything.
2. Review the first 20 to 30 hits.
3. If you don't find anything, refine your search by making one change at a time until you find pertinent records. (For example, search for a name, then an exact name, then add a place, then add a year range, then add a record type, and so forth.)

Note: Many search engines have abilities similar to Google, though how you enter your search may be slightly different than described here. Consult your particular search engine for help on using these techniques.

The following example shows a process for adding keywords and the resulting reduction in the number of hits:

| Search Terms | Number of Hits |
|--|-------------------|
| John Weaver | 5,920,000 results |
| "John Weaver" | 181,000 results |
| "John Weaver" ~genealogy | 58,500 results |
| "John Weaver" California ~genealogy | 4,500 results |
| "John Weaver" 1800..1860 California ~genealogy | 296 results |
| "John Weaver" 1800..1860 California death ~genealogy | 27 results |

The rest of this article explains these and other techniques.

Basic Techniques

To get good results from a Google search, you should understand some basics:

Look for Deceased Ancestors

Many countries have privacy laws that limit what you will find about living people. Savvy genealogists also omit information about living people from the information that they publish.

Use Keywords

Use specific, descriptive keywords. Do not enter complete sentences or questions unless you want to find a quotation.

| Types of Keywords | Keyword Examples |
|------------------------------|---|
| Names | john anderson anna r james |
| Dates | 1890 1800..1890 (indicates a date range) |
| Places | denver colorado centerville davis utah (city county state) |
| Type of event or information | death record vital records |

Don't Worry about Capitalization

Capitalization does not matter. For example, Google considers the following keywords to be the same:

| | |
|-----------|-----------|
| Genealogy | GeNeaLoGy |
| GENEALOGY | genealogy |

The only exceptions are the words "AND" and "OR". They must be typed in capital letters to work properly.

Omit Punctuation

Google ignores most punctuation and symbols. It does pay attention to symbols that are part of the word, such as C++ or C# (which are names of computer programming languages).

Use Symbols Correctly

The following symbols can change the way Google conducts your search. Use them as intended,

| Symbol | Example Search Term | What It Does |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| quotation marks (“ ”) | “alice marie kemp” | Searches for the exact phrase within the quotation marks. |
| tilde (~) | edgar crawley ~genealogy | Finds synonyms of the word after the tilde. In the example, Google find pages that deal with genealogy, family history, and personal history. |
| two periods (..) | 1890..1910 | Specifies a range of years. |
| hyphen or minus (-) | fred marriott -hotel | Excludes the word after the hyphen. In the example/ Google tries to eliminate pages that deal with the Marriott Hotels. |
| asterisk (*) | “mary * crandall” | Finds single letters or words where the asterisk is located. The example finds Mary Louise Crandall, Mary L. Crandall, Mary Ann Harrison Crandall, and so forth. The asterisk must be within quotation marks. It must have spaces before and after it. |
| OR | “john lee” OR “jon lee” | Finds at least one of the keywords. In the example, Google finds pages that have either Jon Lee or John Lee. Tips: Type OR in all capital letters. You can use a pipe symbol () instead of typing the word OR. |
| AND | “robert doyle” AND “meredith crenshaw” | Finds both keywords. In the example, Google finds pages that have both Robert Doyle and Meredith Crenshaw. Tip: Google assumes that you want to use AND. You do not usually need to type it. |
| plus (+) | “marietta ann boyle” +birth | Finds websites that contain exactly the word after the plus sign. This example finds Marietta Ann Boyle and the word “birth.” |

Use Advanced Search

Click the **Advanced Search** link to use a screen that helps you narrow your search to specific names, dates, places, and information types. You can exclude words from search results when a name or place also has other common meanings. For example, you might want to search for websites that include the word “Paris” but not “France”.

When You Get Too Many Search Results

The following are some techniques that you can use to focus your search results when you get too many irrelevant search results:

Add More Keywords

If you get too many search results, try adding more keywords (as demonstrated at the beginning of this article).

Use Quotation Marks

Use quotation marks to have Google search for an exact phrase, such as a name. For example:

“Elijah Brandt”

When you use quotation marks, remember that an individual’s name could be listed in many ways on a website. Be sure to include variations, such as:

“Elijah Brandt”

“Elijah Brand”

“Brand, Elijah”

“Brandt, Elijah”

Tip: To conduct all four searches at once, use the **OR** command, as follows:

“Elijah Brandt” OR “Elijah Brand” OR “Brand, Elijah” OR “Brandt, Elijah”

Include the Word “Genealogy” and Its Synonyms

If you get too many search results that have nothing to do with family history, include the term **~genealogy** in your search. A tilde (~) before a keyword tells Google to find synonyms.

Dealing with Names That Have Common Meanings

Many names that people use are also common words. Smith is both a common surname and someone who works with metal. Rose is a woman’s name and a flower. Many companies are named after people.

When you are looking for a person or a place whose name also has other common meanings, you can use several techniques to eliminate search results that you do not want:

- Use the Not command (-) to exclude the common meaning of the name. For example to find the Marriott surname rather than Marriott hotels, you might enter something like: **marriott -hotel**
- Add terms like **~surname** or **~genealogy** or **~family** to your search.
- Add a date range and place.
- Use the + sign to tell Google that it must contain exactly the word specified, such as: **+married**

When You Get Too Few Results

If you do not find what you want, try your search again. The following techniques can help:

Omit Keywords

A website may not have all of the information that you know about an individual. Try your search again, omitting some keywords.

Look for Variations of Names and Places

A website that contains the information you need may have listed the name of the person or place differently than you expect. Look for variations. Remember, you do not need to search for variations of capitalization.

Tip: Use **OR** instead of conducting a separate search for each variation.

Try Variations of the Name

Here are some types of variations that you can consider:

- The last name might be written first, such as “Phillips, Rebecca Ann.”
- The individual might be listed under a nickname, alias, or other name.
- The individual might be listed with initials.
- Middle names might or might not be included. Try using an asterisk instead of the middle name.
- The spelling might not be exactly as it is spelled now.
- An immigrant may have used a different name in the new country. Or he or she may have used the name in the language of the new country.

Try Variations of the Place

Try the following variations:

- Search for a nearby place. The person may have been born, been married, or died away from home.
- Search at a higher level of jurisdiction. Though a person may was born in a specific town, the birth records may have been kept by a higher level of government, such as the county, state, or country.
- Learn the history of that place. Over timte, it could have been part of different county, territory, or country.
- Look for spelling variations.
- Look for the same name in a different language. This is especially helpful for regions of the world that have been governed by different countries over time.

Try a wide range of dates

If you included a range of years, search for a wider range of years. Try omitting date information.

Combining Techniques

You can get your most precise search results when you combine these techniques:

“jenny wiley” OR “jenny sellards” 1750..1831 pennsylvania OR virginia OR kentucky

“Michael Philpot” +born 1830 ireland

iverson OR iversen ~genealogy

“henry ford” england -car -automobile -"motor company" ~genealogy

Don't Expect to Find Your Entire Family History with Google

The Internet has a large and growing amount of information that can help you build your family tree. Do not, however, expect to find all the pieces of information that you need with Google. For example:

- The records may not be online. You may need to visit the archive or library where they exist or use a copy on microfilm.
- Many countries have laws that restrict access to records about people who may still be living.
- Google may not have indexed the website that contains the information. That means Google cannot find the site.
- Google may have indexed the site but may not be able to conduct a search for you by name, date, or place. You may have to use Google to find the record set. Then use the website to find a specific record.