



Managing Search Results: How to Search Nevada's Literacy Web Site

Note: Nevada's search engine searches Nevada's literacy Web site for PDF files as well as Web pages!

Basic techniques

To improve the quality of the results you get from a search engine, use the following basic techniques:

- Use specific keywords
- Use 2 or 3 search terms or phrase searching
- Enclose phrases in quotation marks like "apple pie"
- The + character guarantees a search term and - removes a term:
+ America -south
- Capitalize proper names
- Word order can be important

Search engines use "relevancy ranking" to organize search results

In ranking your search results, a search engine will typically consider the following:

1. The words that are typed in and where they occur in a web document, alone or in combination. Sometimes this is referred to as the **proximity** of the keywords.
2. Where, or the **location**, of the keyword in the document. A keyword located in the title or header receives a higher ranking than a keyword located in the document text.
3. The **frequency** with which your search terms occurs in a document.

Note: The most relevant results will appear on the first few pages so you need not scroll through hundreds of web pages.

The following information works for nearly all of the search engines

Be Specific

The more specific your search is, the more likely you will find what you want. Don't be afraid to tell a search engine exactly what you are looking for.

Example: If you want information about Windows XP bugs, search for

"Windows XP bugs," not "Windows"

Or even better, search for exactly what the problem is:

"I can't install a USB device in Windows XP"

Surprisingly, this works often.

Using the + Symbol to Add

If you want to make sure that a search engine finds pages that have all the words you enter, not just some of them, use the + symbol.

Example 1: To find pages that have references to both President Clinton and Kenneth Starr on the same page, search this way:

+clinton +starr

Only pages that contain both words would appear in your results.

Example 2: **+windows +XP +bugs**

This would find pages that have all three of the words on them, helpful if you wanted to narrow down a search to Windows XP bugs, rather than on Windows XP in general.

Example 3: **+star +trek +insurrection**

This pulls up pages about Star Trek that also specifically mention "Insurrection," the title of a Star Trek film.

The + symbol is especially helpful when doing a search but finding yourself overwhelmed with information. If you wanted to reserve a camping space in Yosemite National Park and started out searching like for **yosemite**, too many useless results would come up. Instead, search for all the words that must appear on the type of page you're looking for such as:

+yosemite +camping +reservations

Using the - Symbol to Subtract

To find pages that have one word on them but not another word, use the - symbol.

Example 1: Finding information about ESL but not wanting pages relating to ESL computer literacy, search this way:

ESL -computer literacy

This tells the search engine to find pages that mention "ESL" but removes any that also mention "computer literacy."

Example 2: Searching for information specifically about Windows XP but not wanting pages about Windows 98 or Windows 2000 search this way:

XP -98 -2000

Example 3: Searching for the original Star Trek series could bring up pages about Voyager, Deep Space Nine or Star Trek: The Next Generation. The search for just Star Trek, search this way:

star trek -voyager -deep -space -nine -next -generation

In general, the - symbol is helpful for focusing results when you get too many pages are unrelated to the topic. Simply begin subtracting terms you know are not of interest to get better results.

Using Quotation Marks to Multiply

Multiplying terms through a "phrase search" can be a much better way to get the best results.

Using the Yosemite example, the terms entered were these:

+yosemite +camping +reservations

That brought up pages that have all the above words on them, but there's no guarantee that the words may necessarily be near each other. There could be a page that mentions Yosemite in the opening paragraph, camping in another paragraph, and reservations in a third but then never mentions Yosemite camping reservations as a phrase. All the words searched for would appear on this page, but it may not satisfy the search objective.

Doing a *phrase search* avoids this issue. This tells a search engine to search for pages where the terms appear in **exactly** the order specified. A *phrase search* puts quotation marks around the phrase, like this:

"yosemite camping reservations"

Only pages that have all the words and in the exact order shown will be listed.

Remember the "Windows XP bugs" example using +?

+windows +XP +bugs

Multiplying the terms together within a phrase search would work better than using + because that exact phrase probably appears on pages dealing with Windows XP bugs. The search string would look like this:

"windows XP bugs"

As in the last Star Trek movie search above, a better phrase search would look like this:

"star trek insurrection"

But the movie's title actually has a colon after the word "trek" and many pages might also follow this format. Thus, an even better phrase search might be: **"star trek: insurrection"**

Combining Symbols

Adding, subtracting and multiplying can be combined to easily create targeted searches.

Example: Pages only about Star Trek's original series could be searched this way:

star trek -voyager -deep -space -nine -next -generation

A better search might use subtraction and multiplication:

"star trek" -voyager -"deep space nine" -"next generation"