

Getting the best results from your search engine

By SHEILA O'KELLY

The Irish Times, Fri, Aug 18, 2000

The key to using a search engine is that the more relevant information you give, the more accurate will be the result of your search. A few search codes can help speed up the process and protect your PC from being flung out the window at high speed. Just a little bit of basic arithmetic is all the code you need – adding and subtracting.

For example, assume you are from Longford and want to research the dance hall scene there in the last century. Naturally, you want to find out Albert Reynolds's role in this golden era of Irish entertainment.

This is quite a difficult challenge for search engines and demonstrates well how "sums" can help get the answer.

To start with, in the search engine's blank box beside the word "search", try entering: Albert Reynolds dance hall Ireland. The search engine views this as a series of random, isolated words and presumes you want it to search for any sites that contain any of these words – i.e. Albert or Reynolds or dance or hall or Ireland. The possible results on such a search are so overwhelming in number that the search engine just gets confused and returns a few random lines. Using simple notation clarifies the search somewhat. For instance, try:

?????????Albert+Reynolds+dance+hall+Ireland. Now, the search engine understands that you wish it to search for any site containing all of these words – in any order. As yet, it does not understand that Albert goes with Reynolds, or dance with hall, and it will look for any sites containing: Albert and Reynolds and dance and hall and Ireland. Again, this will produce a less effective response. Add some quotation marks to the addition, however, and all becomes clear:

?????????????"Albert Reynolds"+"dance hall"+Ireland Using quotation marks tells the search engine that any words within those marks form a phrase. Now you are getting somewhere. The search engine will look for sites that include the phrases: "Albert Reynolds" and "dance hall" and the word "Ireland".

Likewise, if you want to search sites about Bill Clinton but not Monica Lewinsky you can use the minus sign. Just enter "Bill Clinton"-Lewinsky. This will ensure you will not be bombarded with the sordid details again.

The panel below demonstrates how using just such simple notation can dramatically improve the results of your search.

There are two sites where you can ask a question in plain English and they will endeavour to figure out what you are looking for.

My own favourite is Google, where you can enter a query without any code and it will nearly always come back with a relevant result. It assumes you require + between all words and inserts them (invisibly) for you.

Putting phrases into quote marks helps the search here too. With 560 million Web pages indexed, Google has a bigger database than any other search engine.

Google only returns responses from sites containing all the words in your query. So if you search for: Bill Clinton Monica Lewinsky, it will only return pages detailing all four words and not the pages dealing with Clinton's foreign policy or what he had for breakfast that morning. This leads to more pertinent results to your queries.

Google's "I'm feeling lucky" button is great if you know the name of the company, but not its website address. For example, if you key in the The Irish Times, and then click "I'm feeling lucky", Google brings you straight to its website, www.ireland.com. without the need for any more clicking. Ask Jeeves is another site that can understand English and can be useful for commonplace queries. But it is a bit puzzled by the more specialist searches.

Key in your question and it will suggest a range of questions it can answer. Clicking on one of the little arrows to the right provides further options. Click the Ask button on the left to get the answer.

For more information visit www.searchenginewatch.com.

Search Engines

www.google.com

<http://uk.yahoo.com>

www.dogpile.com

www.askjeeves.co.uk

www.hotbot.com

Irish Search Engines

www.kompass.ie

www.niceone.com

www.doras.ie

www.index-eireann.com/

www.searchingireland.com

www.iesearch.ie

www.local.ie