

Fourteen initial tips on how to handle keywords

1. Think about **how** the topic you search is referred to in the general public and in the specialized literature. To quote Google tip nr.3, instead of saying my *head hurts*, say *headache*, as this is how a medical site will refer to it¹. In other terms, **think downstream**. Select terms that you think might come up in the result hits. Try to think like the authors.
2. Remember that Google (and many search engines) try to **help you in terms of your search**, interpreting and adding to your initial search string, similar words, synonyms, verb tenses, alternate spellings. To predict users' behavior, many search engines rely on **their proprietary thesaurus**. For example, for a search on *dog food*, you don't need to put all the different names of dog breeds, or synonyms like *canine*, *hound*, *mongrel*, *cur*, *pup*, *puppy*, etc. They usually keep these proprietary thesaurus quite confidential, as the success of their search results depends a lot on it.
3. If you want to **control** your search terms, and because the thesaurus process is not transparent (you can only guess from the results what was added) you can add your own variants. To find them, websearch your term/s, with "*synonym or definition or meaning or jargon or abbreviation or dictionary or index or thesaurus*". Thesaurus are very interesting, as they group terms that have the same or similar meanings. The web is full of free **thesaurus**. *powerthesaurus.org* and *keywordtool.io/google* are two interesting ones. You can also websearch "*keyword generator*". If you want your search to be precise and comprehensive, it will never be wrong for you to add the terms you believe will help find the right information.
4. **Build the keywords** yourself, rather than leaving it to the search engines (as mentioned in point 2.). To enlarge your keywords, think in terms of family of words, the way you learned a new language at school. Also, move between the narrower or broader terms. For example: narrower terms for moped are *thermic moped*, *electric moped*, *chopper*, *scooter*, *motor bike*, *dirt bike*, *trail bike*, *electric bike*, *harley davidson*, *suzuki (any brands)*... and broader terms: *motorcycle*, *motorbike*, *vehicle*, *means of transport*, etc. For this Google is very handy, just websearch keywords of your topic with *synonym*, *thesaurus*, *antonym*.

¹ [How to search on Google - Google Search Help](#)). [Viewed 12 January 2021].

5. A keyword technology, search engines use is called « **stemming** »². It consists of **breaking down words to their roots and adding variations of them**. For example, if you use « *consulting* », the stem is « *consult* » and they may add « *consult* », « *consultant/s* », « *consultancy/ies* », etc. The search engine of many professional information systems use this « stemming » technique ; and they allow it to be turned off (for example Factiva, the press database).
6. If you want the search engine to strictly respect your keywords, in other words, you do not wish the search engines to backstage any terms to your keywords, put them in double quotes (the exact word or phrase); this works with many search engines.
7. Also check the **Wikipedia** entry on your topic, if it exists, as you can always increase your understanding on the topic, its language, and collect a couple of references, keywords, and links. Check under *Contents* for e.g. but keep in mind that Wikipedia posts are not always reliable, their quality is uneven. You may also get some additional ideas in a **forum**. Websearch « *your topic and forum or board* ».
8. Remember that each domain or field has its **special language** and when doing long-term research, it is worth picking up some of it; searching will be much better targeted.
9. Try to spot a **source relevant and current to your topic**, and see what terms are used. Academic papers usually have a tag or keyword section (below the Abstract). Finding a good source first is often a great opener. With it, dig deeper ; check the sources and bibliography as well.
10. Depending on your topic, also think beyond your own language, especially if not English, as much is published in that language. Adding English terms to your search string (or any other language relevant to your subject) may help to retrieve some worthwhile hits. Using **translating** tools, such as *Google Translate* or *DeepL* may be tricky, but it is often the only way to search in other languages. Make sure to check the definition in the other language, to ensure it matches.
11. **Word order**: there is not much transparency across the board ; however, assume the order in which you type your keywords **matters**, true with most search engines. Try for example with *diabetes and covid* and then with *covid and diabetes*; results are slightly different. As a rule, try to type first the priority keywords. An alternative is to arrange

² For a detailed definition of « stemming » in the information field, make sure to visit [What is stemming? - Definition from WhatIs.com \(techtarget.com\)](#) [Viewed 12 January 2021].

your words in the order you think they might appear in the documents you are looking for.

12. Find the right balance for the **number of keywords** to include in your search strings. The more the words, the fewer the results, but you may miss some potentially good results. A sound piece of advice is to avoid making 1-word queries and rather switch to a large then a small number of keywords, checking each time the result relevancy and adapting accordingly. A good measure to start off with is a 3 keywords search string.
13. With in-depth requests, try to leave out **futile terms (empty or stop words)**, except when they are part of a query, for e.g. in an expression or phrases, which are usually in double-quotes.
14. Google understands increasingly better **plain language statements**, such as questions which was not the case 15 years ago. This works especially well with simple and uncontroversial requests, usually answering « how » questions. However, as a general rule, you are better off skipping futile terms, concentrating on the most meaningful ones, so that the search engine can save resources and prioritize the main keywords.

More on keywords in our second Handbook on *Information Research Techniques*.