Smarter Google Searches

Let’s try running a search for information about drug trafficking on Google. As you can see from my result screen, which is shown below, we retrieved a mix of source types on our first page of results.

The first four results we found include:

1. Wikipedia
2. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
3. NY Times article on Mexican Drug Trafficking
4. Images of drug trafficking

While all of these sources could be useful in certain situations, let’s talk about which of these we would consider using for an academic paper. Take a minute to think about which you would use, before scrolling down.

Useful sources:

• Newspaper articles from reputable news outlets, including The New York Times, are acceptable sources in academic work. Therefore my third result, the article on the Mexican Drug War, would be an option.

• Reputable governmental and organizational websites are also acceptable academic sources. Since the United Nations is a reputable entity, my second result – from the U.N.’s Office on Drugs and Crime – would be another useful option.
Not useful sources:

- Unless I needed images for my research, the Google Images results will not be particularly useful.
- The Wikipedia page on drug trafficking is not a reputable site for academic work. Why? Because anyone can add or edit Wikis, you cannot assume that the content on the page is accurate at any given point in time.

HOWEVER, Wikipedia pages often have references (or Works Cited) at the bottom. These reference lists can include links to reputable newspaper articles, journal articles, or governmental websites.

Let’s look at the Wikipedia References from our Illegal Drug Trade page (shown below):

Scroll down to the bottom of the page where you see the heading entitled References. These can be links to reputable newspaper articles, governmental websites and other sources:
Improving our Google Results

Of the first four results we saw on our Google screen, only two were truly useful for our research into drug trafficking. Is there a way to improve these odds? YES! **Google has an Advanced Search feature that can dramatically improve your results.**

Let’s look back at our drug trafficking search results screen in Google. To get to the Advanced Search screen, **click on the spoke in the top right corner and select Advanced Search.** (Note that from this menu you can also access your search history, your search settings, and Google’s great Search help pages.)

From the advanced search screen you can modify your search terms as well as narrow the results you will get by date, language, domain, and other factors.

Let’s look at the **top portion of the advanced search screen, called “Find pages with . . .”**
This is the section of the screen where we can change our search terms OR change how Google interprets them.

We typed drug trafficking into our main Google search screen. Here, in the Advanced screen, this shows us that Google understands us to be asking for any websites that have “all these words.” What does this mean? It means Google will look for pages that have the words drug and trafficking in them.

Is this what we intended? Probably not. We want the phrase “drug trafficking” not the words drug and trafficking. To make sure we get the phrase drug trafficking, let’s move our search terms from the “All these words” box into the one below it labeled “this exact word or phrase.” We also need to put quotes around our phrase.

Now that we have corrected our search, let’s look at the bottom portion of the advanced screen entitled “Then narrow your results by . . .”

From the narrow section of the screen, we can control which TYPES of webpages Google will look through to find articles that mention our phrase, “drug trafficking.” We can limit to pages written in a certain language, pages that were updated within a particular time period, pages that come from a specific domain (like .gov), and to other factors.

We want reputable websites with current information for our academic research. How do you think we should narrow our search to obtain the best results?
To get current, reputable websites I am going to narrow my Google search by:

1. **Last Update**: This drop down menu allows me to specify when the website was last updated. I am going to select the “past year” option to get current material.

2. **Site or Domain**: In this box, I can either type in the name of a site that I want Google to search for my phrase (like fbi.gov) or I can ask Google to look through all websites that end in a specific domain (like all .gov or .edu sites). Here, I am going to look for government sites first, so I will limit to the domain .gov.

In the next screenshot, I have added in these limits:

![Google Advanced Search screenshot](image)

Note that there are also some **blue links at the bottom of the page**. These links lead you to invaluable information about how you can add “operators” into your Google searches to make them stronger and how you can use Google to find sites that are similar to websites you already use.

- Click here to learn more about adding operators into your searches
- Click here to learn more about similar websites

Let’s run our search for the phrase “drug trafficking” in .gov sites that have been updated in the last month. To run our search, click on the **ADVANCED SEARCH link**.
Here are the results from our modified search:

Because of the limits we placed in the advanced search screen, all of our results now come from .gov sites that were recently updated.

The first four results of our search – shown in the screenshot above – include news stories from government websites and information about Federal Drug Trafficking penalties. All of these sources could be used in an academic paper on drug trafficking.

See how the advanced search menu can take you from a result list that is 50% relevant to one that is 100% relevant for academic work? Advanced Search in Google is your key to searching smarter and finding better results.

Want more information? See a Librarian at the Reference Desk or call us at (818) 710-2833.

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