



Boolean searching for OSINT

Top tips for beginners

TOP TIPS

Boolean search tells an engine which words must appear, which are alternatives and which to leave out. This sheet gives you the five building blocks, the differences between Google, Bing and X, and a logging habit.

01 Write the question first.

Start with a plain-English question, not the search box. Then pull out the key ideas and list alternatives for each: trading names, synonyms. Company and contracts are ideas; Harrowgate Logistics and tender are alternatives.

```
Has Harrowgate Freight Ltd won or bid for public contracts?
```

06 Keep the query short.

Bing uses only the first ten terms and does not say how it counts operators or quotes. Five synonyms in one bracket is half the budget gone. If you need more alternatives, run two shorter queries and log both.¹

```
("Harrowgate Freight" OR "Harrowgate Logistics") AND (contract OR tender) is already six terms
```

02 Bracket every OR group.

Put alternatives inside brackets with OR between them. Bing evaluates brackets first and OR last, so an unbracketed string reads as Harrowgate and contract, or tender on its own. On Google, brackets are reported to work but undocumented.^{1,6,7}

```
Harrowgate (contract OR tender), not Harrowgate contract OR tender
```

07 Go broad, then narrow.

Run the company name alone first and read what comes back. Add the second idea, then the exclusion, watching what drops out. If a useful result vanishes, that term was too tight.

```
"Harrowgate Freight", then (contract OR tender), then -jobs
```

03 Type OR in capitals.

Google's Advanced Search page shows OR in capitals; vendor guides say lower-case or is an ordinary word. Bing discards lower-case or and not as stop words. One July 2026 test could not tell whether OR changed Google's results much.^{1,2,4,9}

```
contract OR tender
```

08 Match syntax to the platform.

Google implies AND with a space; Bing wants AND typed, or an ampersand. X's developer documentation says a space means AND, but that covers the API, not the site. X's Advanced Search form needs a login. Test first.^{1,4,6,8,13}

```
Bing: ("Harrowgate Freight" OR "Harrowgate Logistics") AND (contract OR tender) NOT jobs
```

04 Quote exact phrases.

Quotation marks keep a phrase together, so the engine looks for the words side by side rather than anywhere on the page. Google and Bing both document this.^{1,3}

```
"Harrowgate Freight"
```

09 Read "no results" carefully.

An empty page means your query found nothing, not that nothing exists. "Harrowgate Freight Limited" can return nothing while "Harrowgate Freight Ltd" finds the notice. Google does not promise to index every page, and site: can miss indexed ones.^{5,14}

```
"Harrowgate Freight Ltd" in place of "Harrowgate Freight Limited"
```

05 Exclude noise with a minus.

A minus sign directly before a word drops pages that contain it. Google documents the minus, not NOT; Bing accepts either, with NOT in capitals. When researching a company, careers pages are the usual noise.^{1,3,4}

```
Google: "Harrowgate Freight" -jobs Bing: "Harrowgate Freight" NOT jobs
```

10 Log every query.

Record the date, platform, exact string, useful results and next step. A logged query is a record of what you asked, and so of what you did not. Anyone can rerun a plain string.

```
23/09/2026 | Bing | "Harrowgate Freight" AND (contract OR tender) NOT jobs | 1 notice | try X
```



■ Operators at a glance

OPERATOR	GOOGLE	BING	X (TWITTER)
AND	Implied by a space	AND or &	Implied by a space (API docs)
OR	OR in capitals; undocumented	OR or , capitals	OR, or "any of these words" field
NOT	Minus only: -jobs	NOT in capitals, or minus	Minus, or the exclude field
Phrase	"exact phrase"	"exact phrase"	"exact phrase", or the phrase field
Brackets	Reported to work, undocumented	Yes, evaluated first	Yes in API docs; test on site
Watch out	OR's effect unclear in one test	First ten terms only	Advanced Search needs login

■ Worked example (fictional)

- 1 Harrowgate Freight Ltd's security lead asks what outsiders could learn about its supply chain. She starts with "Harrowgate Freight" on Google and gets a page of job adverts.
- 2 She adds (contract OR tender) and -jobs. Two trade-press stories and a tender notice remain, which is what she was after.
- 3 On Bing she retypes it as ("Harrowgate Freight" OR "Harrowgate Logistics") AND (contract OR tender) NOT jobs, because Bing wants the AND spelled out.
- 4 On X the Google string finds staff posts about a new depot contract. Her log records what each string found, and where. Company and results are invented.

■ Common mistakes

- ✗ Cramming five synonyms into one bracket when Bing reads ten terms.
- ✗ Assuming Google syntax works unchanged on Bing or X.
- ✗ Treating an empty results page as proof that nothing exists.
- ✗ Recording names from a notice when the question was about the company.

Keep it lawful

Search public information only, for a clear purpose. If your queries pull in personal data, UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018 usually apply, including purpose limitation and data minimisation: record the contract, not the contracts manager's name ^{10,11}. If a result leads to material clearly not meant to be public, stop and tell the owner; knowingly unauthorised access is an offence under section 1 of the Computer Misuse Act 1990 ¹².

Query design is where the course starts. Find out about our Level 3 Award in OSINT at obsidianarctraining.com.

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■ REFERENCES

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