



Search operators 101

Top tips for beginners

TOP TIPS Search operators are short commands that tell an engine exactly what you want. Six do most of a beginner's work, and Google documents all six. This sheet shows each in use and flags the ones old cheat sheets still promise.

01 Start with the question.

Decide what you are asking before you touch an operator. "Which annual reviews has the NCSC published?" becomes a site, a format and a phrase. A precise query can be rerun next month and checked by a colleague. "I Googled it" cannot.

```
site:ncsc.gov.uk filetype:pdf "annual review"
```

06 Filter dates on Google only.

after: and before: narrow by date, singly or as a range. Google says they work on the "last updated" date, which is not always the date you care about, so treat them as rough. Bing documents no date operator.^{1,4}

```
NCSC "annual review" after:2024-01-01 before:2025-12-31
```

02 Quote the exact phrase.

Quotation marks make the engine look for those words side by side. Without them, a page about an annual staff review would qualify for a search on annual review. Google and Bing both document this.^{1,3}

```
"annual review"
```

07 Pick the Web filter.

Google puts AI-generated answers above many results and says AI Overviews cannot be switched off. Its own advice is to pick the Web filter after searching, which leaves text links only. The URL form &udm=14 is undocumented and sometimes stripped.^{5,6,7,17}

```
https://www.google.com/search?q=%s&udm=14 as a browser's custom search engine
```

03 Use site: for one domain.

site: limits results to one website, subdomains included, so site:gov.uk covers ncsc.gov.uk. Google itself warns that site: can leave indexed pages out, so a thin list is not the whole site. Bing documents the same operator.^{1,2,4}

```
site:ncsc.gov.uk "annual review"
```

08 Doubt the result count.

Where Google shows an "About ... results" figure, it is an estimate, and site: is incomplete anyway. That number is not the size of a site, and a thin result is not proof of absence. Run the query on Bing too.^{2,8}

```
Same query on Google, then again on Bing
```

04 Cut noise with a minus.

Put a minus sign directly before the word, no space. In practice -site:gchq.gov.uk drops a whole site, though Google only documents the minus on words, so check the results. Bing also accepts NOT, in capitals.^{1,3,11}

```
NCSC "annual review" -consultation
```

09 Distrust old cheat sheets.

cache: is gone; Google confirmed in September 2024 that it no longer works. intitle:, inurl: and intext: are absent from Google's current help pages, and a July 2026 test found inurl: applied loosely. Check results by eye.^{1,9,12,18}

```
intitle:"annual review" NCSC, then check each result's title by eye
```

05 Find documents with filetype:.

filetype:pdf returns only PDFs; docx, xlsx and csv work the same way. Run it against your own organisation's domain and you see every document the engine has indexed there. The example domain is a fictional haulier.^{1,4,16}

```
site:harrowgate-freight.example filetype:pdf
```

10 Log engine, date and query.

Results vary with your location, history and settings, so a bare query is not enough. Write down the date, the engine and filter, the exact string and what came back. Otherwise nobody can check your finding, including you.¹⁰

```
23 Sep 2026 · Google, Web filter · site:ncsc.gov.uk filetype:pdf "annual review" · 3 PDFs
```



■ Operator status, September 2026

OPERATOR	GOOGLE	BING	STATUS
"exact phrase"	Documented	Documented	Works
site:	Documented	Documented	Works, but incomplete
-word	Documented	Documented, or NOT in capitals	Works
filetype:	Documented	Documented	Works
before: / after:	Documented, "last updated" date	Not documented	Works on Google only
intitle: / intext: / inurl:	Not documented	intitle:, inbody: only	Undocumented; inurl: unreliable in one test
cache:	Removed	n/a	Retired September 2024

■ Worked example: NCSC annual reviews (public organisation)

- 1 The NCSC publishes an annual review; the 2025 edition came out on 14 October 2025. You want every edition as a PDF. Start broad: `site:gov.uk filetype:pdf "annual review"` NCSC.
- 2 Expect near-duplicates. GCHQ's site carries a news article about the review with its own printable PDF, so the same document appears under two domains.
- 3 Narrow to the NCSC's own site for a clean list: `site:ncsc.gov.uk filetype:pdf "annual review"`. Add `after:2024-01-01` on Google for recent editions.
- 4 Rerun in Bing without the date operator and compare. Record both queries, the engines, the date and what each returned. The log is the deliverable, not the bookmark.

■ Common mistakes

- ✗ Reading "About 1,200 results" as the size of a website.
- ✗ Copying `intitle:`, `inurl:` or `cache:` from a 2019 cheat sheet.
- ✗ Using only Google, so Bing's different index is never checked.
- ✗ Saving the link but not the engine, filter and date.

Keep it lawful

Searching public pages is not the risk. If a result leads to a file clearly not meant to be public, stop, do not download it and tell the owner; accessing material you know you are not authorised to see can fall under section 1 of the Computer Misuse Act 1990 ¹³. Where personal data is involved, UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018 apply: collect only what your purpose needs ^{14,15}.

Search technique and logging run through the whole course. Find out about our Level 3 Award in OSINT at obsidianarctraining.com.

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