



Reverse image search basics

Top tips for beginners

TOP TIPS A reverse image search starts with a picture instead of words and finds copies, edits and the pages using them. Use it when a photo captioned "happening now" needs checking.

01 Use at least two engines.

Each engine builds its own index by crawling the web, so each sees a different slice of it. One photo might return 40 pages on one engine and none on another; neither is wrong. ^{1,2,15}

Google Lens, Bing Visual Search, TinEye and Yandex Images, same photo

02 Save a clean copy first.

Keep the largest version, its URL, who posted it and when you found it. If the post is deleted an hour later, your log is the only record it existed.

2026-09-23 09:14 | flood-tower.jpg | @harrowgate_updates (fictional)

03 Switch Lens to exact copies.

On google.com, click the search-by-image icon, then upload, drag in or paste a link. Lookalikes show what a picture resembles, not where it has been. Switch to the exact-copies view, labelled "Exact matches" at the time of writing. ^{3,4,7}

200 clock-tower lookalikes become three aggregators carrying the exact picture

04 Read "About this image".

Google estimates when it may first have seen the picture or a similar version. It is only available in some regions, and it is an estimate, so confirm it with another engine. ⁵

"About 7 years ago" on a photo posted as "RIGHT NOW"

05 Sort TinEye by oldest.

TinEye hunts for the picture itself, edits included, not lookalikes. Add it by file, drag-and-drop, clipboard or web address, then sort by oldest. Read that date as "online by then": it is when the crawler got there. ^{1,6,11}

Crawled 14 March 2019 on thames-weather-archive.example (fictional)

06 Try Bing and Yandex too.

On Bing Images, click the camera icon, then drag in, upload or paste a picture or URL. Yandex Images has a search-by-image option and analysts have long rated it highly for landscapes and objects. ^{2,8,16}

Bing flags a stock page marked "digitally edited"; Yandex adds a 2021 travel blog

07 Crop, then search again.

Crop to the interesting part and rerun the search. Blurring or pixelating clutter and people steers the engine to the background. A landmark drowns you in lookalikes; a sign places the photo. ²

Cropping to the flood-defence sign swaps tower lookalikes for pages about that stretch of river

08 Treat "no match" as one view.

An empty results page means that engine has no match. Copies may exist elsewhere, and the top result is the most similar, not the oldest. Bing found nothing dated; the photo was still seven years old. ¹⁵

Bing: none. TinEye: 2019. Same photo.

09 Think before you upload.

Your upload goes to a third party. TinEye says it does not save search images; Microsoft says photos may improve Bing; Google may store URLs you search with; Yandex says data may be processed in Russia. Client photos need authority first. ^{1,7,8,9}

Public post about a public event: fine. Client CCTV still: not without authority.

10 Treat AI answers as leads.

Chatbots now "geolocate" photos. GeoContext, a September 2026 preprint (not peer-reviewed), found five vision-language models struggled to reject false location claims; 83.8% of wrong "yes" answers came with confidence of at least 0.8. ¹⁰

"Yes, that is Westminster" is a lead, not a finding



■ Four engines at a glance

ENGINE	GOOD FOR	WATCH OUT FOR
Google Lens	Exact-copies view; "About this image" dates	Many lookalikes; Google may store searched URLs
Bing Visual Search	Upload, drag, paste a link or webcam	Uploads may be used to improve Bing
TinEye	The same picture, even edited; sort by oldest	Few lookalikes; dates are crawl dates
Yandex Images	Long rated well for landscapes and objects	Russian company; data may be processed in Russia

■ Worked example (fictional)

- 1 A photo of Elizabeth Tower with floodwater on the embankment is posted as "Westminster flooding RIGHT NOW". Save the largest copy, URL, poster and time.
- 2 Google Lens, exact-copies view: three aggregators carry the picture. "About this image" says about seven years ago.
- 3 TinEye, sorted by oldest: crawled 14 March 2019 on thames-weather-archive.example. Bing finds a stock page marked "digitally edited". Yandex adds a 2021 travel blog.
- 4 Put each engine's earliest date and source in one table. The photo is from 2019 or earlier and edited. No single engine found all four leads. All results invented.

■ Common mistakes

- ✗ Running one engine and trusting the first, most similar match.
- ✗ Reading a TinEye crawl date as the date the photo was taken.
- ✗ Uploading a client's or a stranger's photo to a public engine.
- ✗ Using reverse image search to identify people rather than verify claims.

Keep it lawful

A photo of a recognisable person is usually their personal data ¹². Under UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018, have a clear purpose and collect only what you need ¹⁷: checking whether a flood photo is old qualifies; collecting pictures of the poster does not. Biometric data used to identify someone is special category data, so face-search sites are out of scope ¹³. Never log in to someone else's account; unauthorised access can be an offence under the Computer Misuse Act 1990 ¹⁴.

Image verification is part of the course. Find out about our Level 3 Award in OSINT at obsidianarctraining.com.

obsidianarctraining.com

■ REFERENCES

All sources accessed 23 September 2026.

- 1 TinEye Blog, "How to use TinEye to search for an image" (vendor blog), 23 April 2026. blog.tineye.com/how-to-use-tineye-search/.
- 2 Bellingcat, "Guide To Using Reverse Image Search For Investigations", 26 December 2019 (over 12 months old; engine rankings may have changed). www.bellingcat.com/resources/how-tos/2019/12/26/guide-to-using-reverse-image-search-for-investigations/.
- 3 Princeton University Library, "Reverse Image Searching", Media Literacy research guide, last updated 30 October 2025. libguides.princeton.edu/medialiteracy/reverseimage searching.
- 4 SerpApi, "Google Lens Exact Matches API" (vendor documentation; corroboration only), undated. serpapi.com/google-lens-exact-matches-api.
- 5 Google Search Help, "Learn more about an image", undated. support.google.com/websearch/answer/14177408?hl=en.
- 6 TinEye Help, "Can I sort my results?", last updated 9 June 2021 (over 12 months old). help.tineye.com/article/246-can-i-sort-my-results.
- 7 Google Search Help, "Search with an image on Google", undated. support.google.com/websearch/answer/1325808?hl=en-GB.
- 8 Microsoft Support, "Using Bing Visual Search", last updated 31 August 2026. support.microsoft.com/en-us/bing/using-bing-visual-search.
- 9 Yandex, "Privacy Policy", effective 26 August 2025. yandex.com/legal/confidential/en/.
- 10 Yifan Zhang and Kai Wang, arXiv, "GeoContext: One Context Ladder, Two Failure Modes in Vision-Language Geolocation: Flat Reliance on User-Provided Location Context and False Confirmation of Location Claims" (preprint, v1), 4 September 2026. arxiv.org/abs/2609.05761.
- 11 TinEye Help, "Can TinEye find similar images? Does TinEye do facial recognition?", last updated 2 April 2019 (over 12 months old). help.tineye.com/article/235-can-tineye-find-similar-images-does-tineye-do-facial-recognition.
- 12 Information Commissioner's Office, "Taking photographs: data protection advice for schools", 11 August 2025 (over 12 months old). ico.org.uk/for-organisations/advice-for-small-organisations/news-blogs-and-events/blogs/taking-photographs-data-protection-advice-for-schools/.
- 13 Information Commissioner's Office, "What is special category data?", last updated 9 April 2024 (over 12 months old; under review following the Data (Use and Access) Act). ico.org.uk/for-organisations/uk-gdpr-guidance-and-resources/lawful-basis/special-category-data/what-is-special-category-data/.
- 14 legislation.gov.uk, "Computer Misuse Act 1990, section 1: Unauthorised access to computer material", revised legislation. www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1990/18/section/1.
- 15 TinEye Help, "TinEye Tutorial", last updated 2 September 2026. help.tineye.com/article/265-tineye-tutorial.
- 16 Yandex, "Search by images and photos — Yandex Images", undated. yandex.com/images/.
- 17 Information Commissioner's Office, "A guide to the data protection principles", last updated 23 March 2026. ico.org.uk/for-organisations/uk-gdpr-guidance-and-resources/data-protection-principles/a-guide-to-the-data-protection-principles/.