

# The Advanced Google Searches Every Student Should Know

by Alan November of November Learning | [NovemberLearning.com](http://NovemberLearning.com)

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“Did he *seriously* just ask that? How old is this guy?” Well yes, I recently seriously just asked a group of students if they knew how to search Google. And yes, the students got a good laugh from my question.

“Of course I know how to use Google,” I have been told by every student to whom I have asked the question.

“Really? Let’s see. This won’t take long,” I promise.

The truth is that every student can use Google on some level. What is interesting to me is that when I interview students about their search strategies and I ask them if they have ever asked their teachers for help with a search the answer is almost always, “No”. What if our students are overconfident about their search skills?

If you watch your students use Google you will probably observe that most begin their search by simply typing the title of the assignment verbatim into Google (i.e., Iranian Hostage Crisis). They do this partly because this technique can yield satisfying answers to basic questions, and because in many cases they haven’t been explicitly taught to do anything else. It is the easy way out that does not require much in the way of critical thinking.

After their results pop up, most students will look only at the first screen of results, believing that those top hits contain everything they will need to complete their assignment. In many ways, this response is natural — it’s quick and easy. If they do not find what they are looking for within three tries they will likely give up and assume that Google cannot fulfill their request.

But what happens when a meaningful search requires more thinking than simply typing in the assignment?

## Expert Google search strategies

The internet presents our students with the significant challenge of learning how to access and synthesize massive amounts of information from all over the world. To manage overwhelming amounts of information, it is critical to learn how to design searches that take you past the first page of results. The quality of information can lead to a over simplification of an issue or lead to a much deeper understanding of the nuances of a topic.

In today’s global economy, global empathy is one of the most critical skills we must teach our students. To this end, utilizing the internet strategically can lead students to understand other cultures and viewpoints and spark authentic learning experiences. While the internet provides us with the opportunity to explore issues from multiple perspectives and exposes our simplified narratives, the reality of how Google targets basic search often leads to localized results.

The irony of having access to thousands of channels of information is that many of our students seem satisfied when they find the most visually accessible version of the truth. Students must be educated to ask themselves, “How can I design a search or series of searches that yields the highest quality results? As educators, we must equip our students with the skills and strategies to help them develop sophisticated search strategies that will enable them to engage in critical analysis.

Let’s take a look at a detailed example assignment, “the Iranian Hostage Crisis.”

If you key in “Iranian Hostage Crisis” in Google, and you are in North America, your search in the top screen will yield no sources from Iran, despite the fact that this was where the event took place. Prior to the rise of the internet, omitting Iranian sources may have been completely acceptable and practical in a school setting. There simply were no sources from Iran in the average well-stocked school or town library.

When I challenge students to redesign their search to yield sources from Iran, they usually add the words “Iranian sources” into the search bar. Sadly, this will also lead to zero content from Iran’s perspective, and students will continue to be flooded with results detailing a Western version of the event.

Whenever students are researching a problem that involves another country, they should make use of “country codes” and/or use advanced Google searches to limit their search to a particular country. (A list of country codes can be [found here](#). “IR” is the two letter country code for Iran. If students want the shortcut to generate Iranian sources, they can type “site:ir” into the search and the results will be from Iran. (“Site:” is a Google operator that limits results to content in the extension portion of a web address.)

While getting to Iran is just a matter of looking up the two-letter country code and understanding the Google operator “site,” the creative part of the search is imagining the Iranian perspective. Essentially all students will type: “site:ir Iranian hostage crisis” after they are taught to limit their search to Iran. At that point, students must be challenged to question their perspective and possible biases: “Do you think the Iranians called this event the Iranian Hostage Crisis?”

This is where Wikipedia can be quite useful. With a quick scan of the Wikipedia article about the Iranian Hostage Crisis, students learn that in Iran the event is known as “The Conquest of the American Spy Den.” (Many teachers decry the use of Wikipedia as an authoritative source, and it is true that consulting Wikipedia alone does not represent a comprehensive search strategy. However, Wikipedia may be used to expose researchers to content that can lead students to refine their search.)

Now that we have sorted out the mechanics of accessing the Iranian sources and perspectives, here is the revised Google search:

### **site:IR Conquest of the American Spy Den**

Using this new search, students are presented with an entirely new set of sources, all from Iran. But why stop there? How do we know these sources are credible? What if we could isolate our search to sources from Iranian universities? To access this type of refined search, students can search:

### **site:ac.ir Chronology of Conquest of the American Spy Den**

*\*The addition of “ac” indicates an institution of higher education, much like “.edu” does for American universities.*

Students will notice that this new search has no resemblance to their first, and that the information contained in this latest search offers a vastly different account of the American-named “Iranian Hostage Crisis.” Using this new search, students are empowered to access a perspective they may not otherwise

have considered. Students have now used Google to gain a perspective than they previously imagined was possible.

When confronted with examples of using the advanced features of Google, the students who previously laughed at the question, “Do you know how to use Google?” are stunned, and in some cases even embarrassed or *mad*. They wonder why they have never been taught how to perform this type of search. They often are quick to ask: “What else don’t I know?”

There is great news in this response. Students do not want to feel inadequate when they use the internet. Once you start to teach them the tricks of deep research they will often ask for more. With some minor adjustments in how we think about and teach basic online research skills, teachers can help create an environment where students *take pride in their ability* to “zoom in” on a topic as deeply as possible. It makes huge sense for a teacher to ask students to show their search strategies as well as their results. In this way, teachers can gain insights into how students thought about querying a search engine.

You have to love it when students demand to learn more!