

Bing Gets Brainy
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When I think of search engines to use for a research project, Microsoft's Bing (www.bing.com) usually rates down there with Kosmix and Ask.com - the sites I go to just so I can say I tried my queries in lots of search engines. Until now. Bing has surfaced some of its advanced search operators and added some new operators that have grabbed my attention.

Head over to Bing's Advanced Operator Reference (msdn.microsoft.com/en-us/library/ff795620.aspx), a minimalist page that lists operators and, with another click, gives a brief description and example of when the operator could be used. Note that these are intended for APIs, not searching, and some of these commands don't translate over to search. The laconic documentation doesn't help users understand the power behind some of the operators, so I will step into the breach with "Mary Ellen's Field Guide to Bing's Brain." This doesn't include every operator - just the ones I find most useful for power searchers.

Contains: Specifies that any page retrieved has links to specific file types. Syntax is `contains:files_type` (example: `apiculture contains:ppt`). This is not a search within pages of those file types; the example here is looking for pages that both contain the word "apiculture" and have links to files with the .ppt extension. I have found, in looking for tutorials or how-to pages, that slide decks can be useful ways of conveying information. My assumption, then, is that a page that has my subject as well as links to slide decks will likely have collections of resources on my topic.

HasFeed: Specifies that any page retrieved has a link to an RSS feed on the page. Syntax is `feed:` (example: `apiculture hasfeed:`). As with the `contains:` command, this isn't searching within RSS feeds; this search finds pages with RSS feeds on them. If you are interested in monitoring an agency within the U.S. federal government, for example, you could search `site:dol.gov ERISA fiduciary hasfeed:` to identify likely feeds.

Instreamset: Lets you limit your search to one or more fields - title, body, anchor, or URL. Syntax is `instreamset:(first_field second_field):search_word`. Suppose you wanted to search for pages that have your subject term in either the title of a page or the URL. You would search `instreamset:(title anchor):geothermal`.

LinkFromDomain: Identifies all the outgoing links on a specific domain, optionally limited to a particular topic. Syntax is `linkfromdomain:a_domain_name`. This is a great way of using an authoritative, link-rich site to identify resources on a topic. To find some tutorials on renewable energy, for example, you might look for links from anywhere within HowStuffWorks.com that have the words "tutorial," "renewable," and "energy" by searching `linkfromdomain:howstuffworks.org renewable energy tutorial`. This search will retrieve any page that was linked to from HowStuffWorks.com and that has the words "renewable," "energy," and "tutorial" on it.

Norelax: Lets you specify that all your search terms, not just the first four, be included in the query. Syntax is norelax:search_word. Use this operator for every search term you include in your query after the first four. This tells Bing not to "relax" its Boolean AND for the fifth and subsequent words in a query. When you are creating a more complex query and want to ensure that Bing treats all words as mandatory, you could search "west nile" mosquito non-toxic norelax:spraying, using norelax: to make the search word spraying mandatory.

And finally, Bing recently announced its new social search tab (www.bing.com/social), which currently indexes Twitter posts and public Facebook updates. Type a query and the Summary results page shows the latest three updates from Twitter or Facebook with those words in them, along with links that were mentioned within Twitter or Facebook. Click the Public Updates tab and you can watch real-time updates that match your query as they scroll down the screen.

It looks like Bing's Twitter feed runs between 2 minutes and an hour behind the Twitter site. If you need ultra-current content, go to the source. Find this by clicking the Shared Links tab to see a search results page with URLs to webpages that matched your query and were linked to from within Twitter or publicly viewable Facebook updates.

Each search result also includes a snippet of text from the update, so you can see the context in which the link was mentioned. This can be a powerful tool if you need to get up to speed quickly on a newly emerging topic; you can see what the buzz is and see what websites are mentioned in that context.

While I still don't expect to use Bing as my default search engine, I've gained a lot more respect for its search capabilities, and I know when to use it in the future.

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Mary Ellen Bates (mbates@BatesInfo.com, www.BatesInfo.com) takes pride in wrestling any search syntax into submission.