Menu

Why Millennials Don't Know How to Use Google

A recent study conducted in Illinois colleges finds the usual: students don’t know how to research stuff. Only now, they don’t know how to research stuff using Google. They were just born too late.

BY WHET MOSER
AUGUST 23, 2011, 11:56 AM

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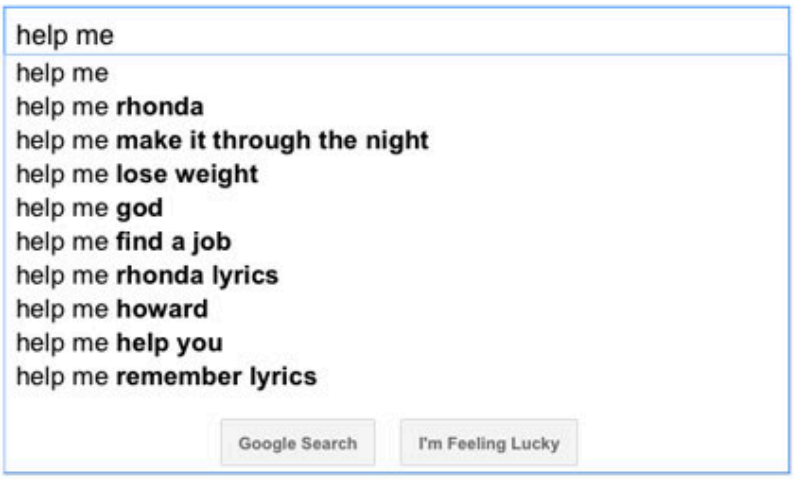

File under "everything old is new again": students don't know how to search for stuff. Only this time, students don't know how to use Google.

The ERIAL Project, Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries, looked at student research behavior and found what to them was surprising (emphasis mine):

> The most alarming finding in the ERIAL studies was perhaps the most predictable: when it comes to finding and evaluating sources in the Internet age, students are downright lousy.
>
> [snip]
>
> Throughout the interviews, students mentioned Google 115 times —

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> good at using Google. **They were basically clueless about the logic underlying how the search engine organizes and displays its results.** Consequently, the students did not know how to build a search that would return good sources. (For instance, limiting a search to news articles, or querying specific databases such as Google Book Search or Google Scholar.)
>
> Duke and Asher said they were surprised by "the extent to which students appeared to lack even some of the most basic information literacy skills that we assumed they would have mastered in high school." Even students who were high achievers in high school suffered from these deficiencies, Asher told *Inside Higher Ed* in an interview.

I'm completely unsurprised for a couple reasons. First, my mother spent years teaching freshman English at a small state school, and many of my friends were the children of academics. So I grew up hearing constant complaints about the inability of 18-year-olds to conduct basic academic research. (That's why I'm reasonably good at it: not because I'm particularly smart, but because I learned practically from the cradle that being unable to look something up would be abandoning my birthright.)

Sure, sure, but these "digital natives" grew up on Google, right? Yes they did:

> My favorite fish joke, which comes courtesy of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, goes like this: A hoary old fish, hooks and leaders trailing like battle ribbons from his jaw, approaches a collection of loitering youngsters taking their ease by a coral reef. "Hey," says the grandpa,

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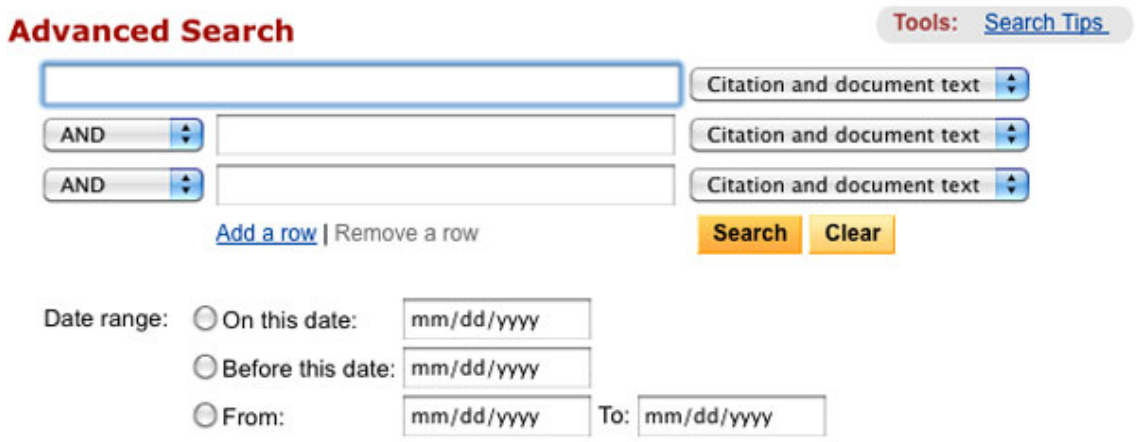
and away, they turn to each other and, almost simultaneously, say, "What's that all about? What's water?"

Second: I also grew up at the dawn of the Internet age, when proto-Googles like Proquest (back in the dark ages, when it was on CD-ROM cartridges) gave way to search engines. Those of you who are as sufficiently aged as I may recall the importance of proper Boolean search methods. ProQuest's advanced search, a clear tab on the main search page, still relies on good old Boolean operators:



Whereas Google's advanced search tries to talk you through it:

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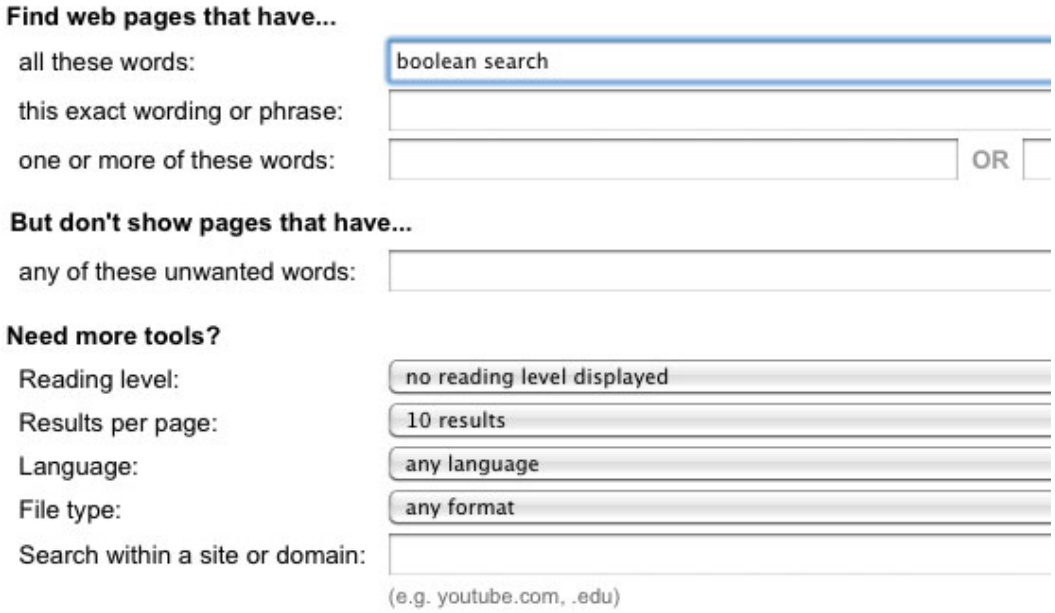

Beyond that, Google's advanced search is hard to find. You first have to run a search, and then look for the "advanced search" link at the top right-hand corner of the page. ProQuest, in short, makes you think like a computer. Or, more accurately, it throws you in the water and makes you swim. Having had to do that as a kid, I'm much better at using natural search, because the principles are still similar, and I know what Google wants from me, even as it goes to some lengths to keep me from knowing that.

Which is not to say that Google is easier to use for research. Quite the opposite. It's more democratic, thanks to the PageRank insight, whereas earlier library databases are limited to sources that research-oriented companies think are relevant, whether it's ProQuest or JSTOR or ERIC. Google gives you everything on the Internet that's able to be indexed, and not everyone on the Internet has your best interests at heart. Which is why this is also not surprising:

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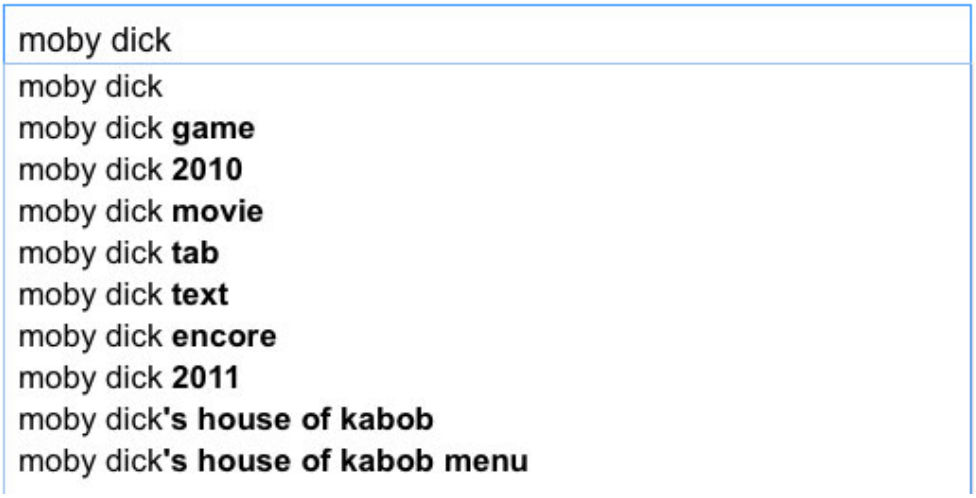
among students at the five institutions involved in this study," Duke and Asher wrote.

No kidding. I experience anxiety and confusion every day when searching for information, much more so when I'm using Google. The signal-to-noise ratio is much, much worse, as content chop-shops flood Google with repetitive dross. And while older databases are tightly controlled by genres of publication, Google lumps everything in the world together, requiring searchers to be more instinctually discerning:



Say what you will about JSTOR, if I'm searching for "Moby Dick," it won't return a restaurant menu.

This is going to be a real challenge for teachers and librarians going forth. A well-organized search on an academic database will return a handful of results, and the odds are good that at least one will be what you need, or will at least point you towards what you need in the text or references. A well-organized search on Google will still return tens of thousands of results, most

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Which is not a complaint; obviously, Google's wide net catches relevant information that databases often won't have. And shifting the balance of power away from edited and/or refereed publications is not altogether a bad thing. But it does require that students be familiar with the conventions of the search engine world, which are vastly more complex and ever-changing. Teaching students *those* principles is closer to sociology than it is simple algebraic logic.

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