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From The Sunday Times March 12, 2006

Set loose a smarter sleuth

Choose from a new breed of customised search engines and learn to use them wisely. As Chris Sherman shows, you'll find the web equivalent of a needle, not a haystack

Martin wants to buy an iPod, but doesn't know which model best suits his quirky listening habits. Melanie is terrified of the proposed course of cancer therapy her consultant recently recommended, and is desperate for an alternative. They both consult the Google search engine. Martin's results seem to advise avoiding an iPod altogether and opting instead for an MP3-enabled mobile phone.

Melanie's results suggest that she should try a course of herbal therapy, combined with something called "somatic imagery", as an alternative to conventional cancer treatment.

Preposterous? Of course. Yet this is what can happen if you consult only Google or fail to pose the right questions. Turning to Google for information has become a reflex action, yet we rarely ask ourselves if we engage this search engine wisely. To search quickly and effectively, it is crucial to understand how Google, or any other engine, works, and what extra tools it offers beyond basic sleuthing.

You must also ask whether Google, for all its acclaim, is the best tool for a particular job. Offline, we would seek out information from someone with the knowledge and skills to provide the best answers, and the same should apply online. Common sense should have had Martin turning to technology reviews for advice and Melanie consulting another oncologist for a second opinion.

Today, a new breed of search engines offers alternative approaches and far better qualifications for unearthing information on a new topic or specialist subject. So how can you improve your odds of hunting down the best information? Remember that if you are looking for UK-based information, always visit www.google.co.uk (Google's .com address

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brings substantially American results) and select the "Pages from the UK" button below the search bar.

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Many people forget to enclose their search terms in double quote marks — this ensures that the words you have entered must appear together as a phrase, in the order that you typed them. This simple technique is so powerful that it can reduce irrelevant results by 90% or more.

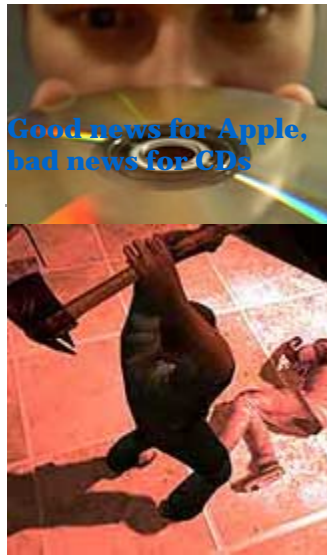
With the football World Cup in Germany mere months away, eager fans are turning to the web to find out about their team's preparations, follow any breaking news or buy tickets for the event itself.

However, simply typing "World Cup" into Google's search bar throws up a few surprises. The first 10 results link to an online football game, results from previous World Cup qualifiers, and sites dedicated to rugby, mountain-biking and cricket. You will find few sites high on this list that look forward to the June event. This is a characteristic of the way Google searches: it ranks a website by the number of sites that have linked to it in the past, and how many, in turn, have linked to these sites. Recent information is not a factor.

For new information about the World Cup in Germany, you must be as specific as you can — this is the golden rule of searching, and applies to all engines. Adding terms such as **2006** to the query will drill towards your desired result; and including the plus symbol (+) before a term, as in **+england**, will ensure that this word appears in every search result. Conversely, the hyphen (-) will instruct Google to subtract all results containing a word you specify (**-brazil**). This helps to focus results when you turn up too many that are unrelated to your topic. Simply begin subtracting terms you know are not of interest. Looking for pictures? Click the Images link above the search bar. Google offers surprisingly few images of World Cup football.

You will also notice Sponsored Links at the top and right of the page. These are advertisements, not search results, and, as a general rule, they are handy if you're looking to take action rather than simply seeking information — to buy official team posters, say, or book tickets and accommodation in Germany. Beneath these links, you will often see what Google calls "onebox" results. These are not labelled explicitly, nor do they always appear. Rather, they are triggered when Google thinks that it has relevant information from specialised web sources, such as news, stock quotes or weather, that include the search term. If you're strictly interested in one of these areas of information, you are almost always better off clicking this link rather than continuing down the page.

Despite Google's many strengths, there are times when you should head to newer search engines in your information hunt. The recently developed Clusty.com takes a "meta-search" approach to sleuthing, sending your terms to several engines (including MSN, Ask and less familiar, but worthwhile, options such as Gigablast and the Open Directory Project), then combining the results in a single list. You will also find results divided, or "clustered", by topics in the top left-hand corner of the page. A search for "World Cup" presents results under categories such as History, Tickets and Fifa; you can then



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Clustering has many valuable applications: search for your surname and “family history”, for example, and you will immediately unearth websites that may help you to trace your ancestry. Then merely click on the hits Clusty groups under Genealogy.

Clusty's natural search results also offer several interesting features not found on Google. To the right of each main result are three small icons that enable you to open a particular result in a new window, highlight the clusters where a particular result appears or view a snapshot of the page in question without leaving the main results page.

Like Google, Clusty enables you to switch between web results, online news sources and images by clicking on tabs above the search bar. Clusty offers access to fewer news sources than Google, but its images are more up-to-date, so a search for “bird flu”, for example, yields a choice selection of recent news images that may suit your purpose better than Google's broad mix of photographs, maps and quirky background material.

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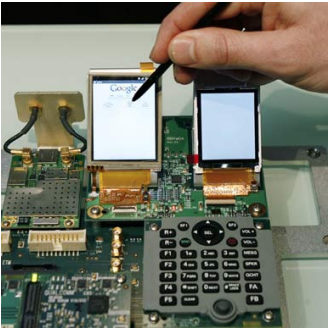
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