# Google it up!
# A Tutorial on Selecting Just the Right Phrase

By Juan Fernandez, Student Writing Support Consultant 2011–2013
B.S., Biology, 2013

In this tutorial, we will learn a two-part method to use Google searches to test if or confirm that a phrase we want to use in our writing has a correct structure and is commonly used by speakers of Standard American English (SAE) in writing.

> *A note on terms: In this tutorial, we will generally use the word* phrase *to talk about a group of words enclosed in quotation marks that we are searching in Google. However, we will sometimes also use the word* phrase *with its real meaning, which is "a sequence of two or more words arranged in a grammatical construction and acting as a unit in a sentence."*

This method is useful for finding:

- The correct words and/or word order of an idiomatic expression
- The correct or best preposition to use in a prepositional phrase or phrasal verb
- Whether the structure of a phrase you have written is correct and normally used in SAE
- Whether a word you have included in a phrase makes sense or if there are better options for such a word
- What type of word (e.g. noun, adjective, verb, preposition) or type of verb conjugation goes in a specific position in a phrase
- Many more things you may think of!

## Background information: three Google search operators

To use the "Google it up" method, we first have to learn how to use three Google search operators:

### Search operator 1: quotation marks (" ")

When we use **quotation marks** (" ") at both ends of a phrase we are searching, Google will look for results than contain such words as a whole and as they are written instead of just looking for results that contain such words scattered throughout the text or in any order (see Figure 1: Quotation marks).
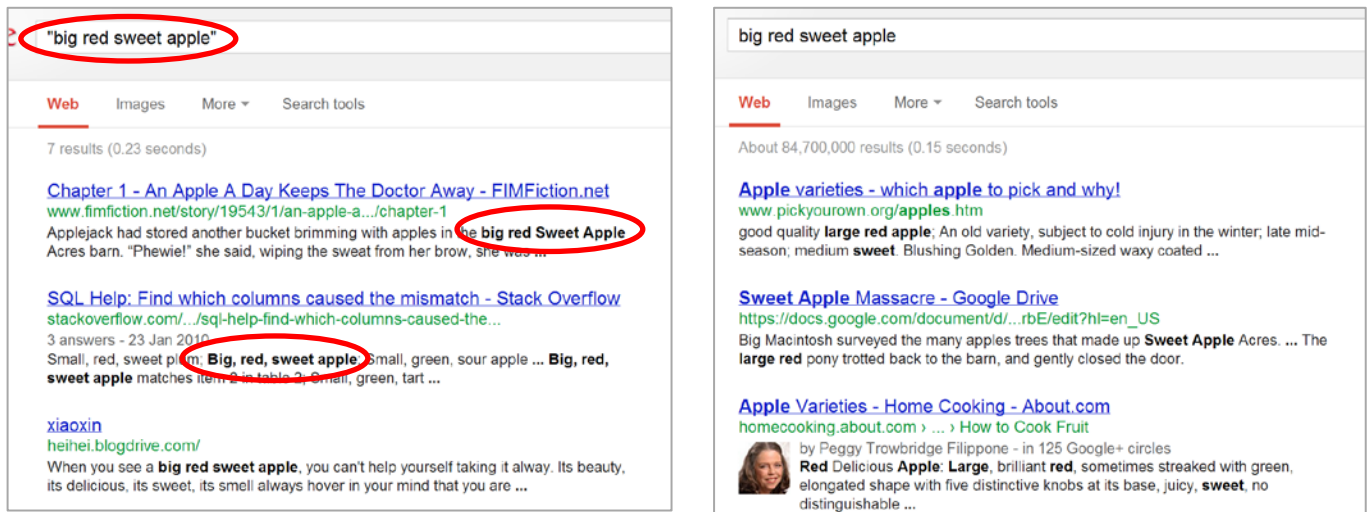
**Figure 1: Quotation marks.**

In the box on the left side of Figure 1, Google found only results that contained "big red sweet apple" all together because quotation marks were used at the ends of the phrase "big red sweet apple." Conversely, in the box on the right, Google found many more results that contained the words "big," "red," "sweet," and "apple," but the words did not occur together in one phrase; rather, they were scattered throughout the text of the results.

| PRO TIP | Although the words within the quotation marks will appear together in the results, they will not necessarily appear as a meaningful phrase. In some results, there might be punctuation marks like commas or periods in between some of the words, suggesting that these words do not occur as a meaningful phrase in such results. |
|---------|---|

## Search operator 2: asterisk (*)

We will concentrate on how the **asterisk** (*) and the quotation marks work in synergy when performing a Google search. When we put an asterisk next to a word or phrase (or in the middle of a phrase) that has been enclosed by quotation marks, we tell Google to search for the phrase as it is written *and* include results that contain any words that occur at the position of the asterisk if they exist in the results.

With the asterisk we can "test" what type of words (e.g. nouns, verbs, adjectives or prepositions) can occur or if any word occurs between two words in a phrase we are testing, as seen in Figure 2: Asterisk.
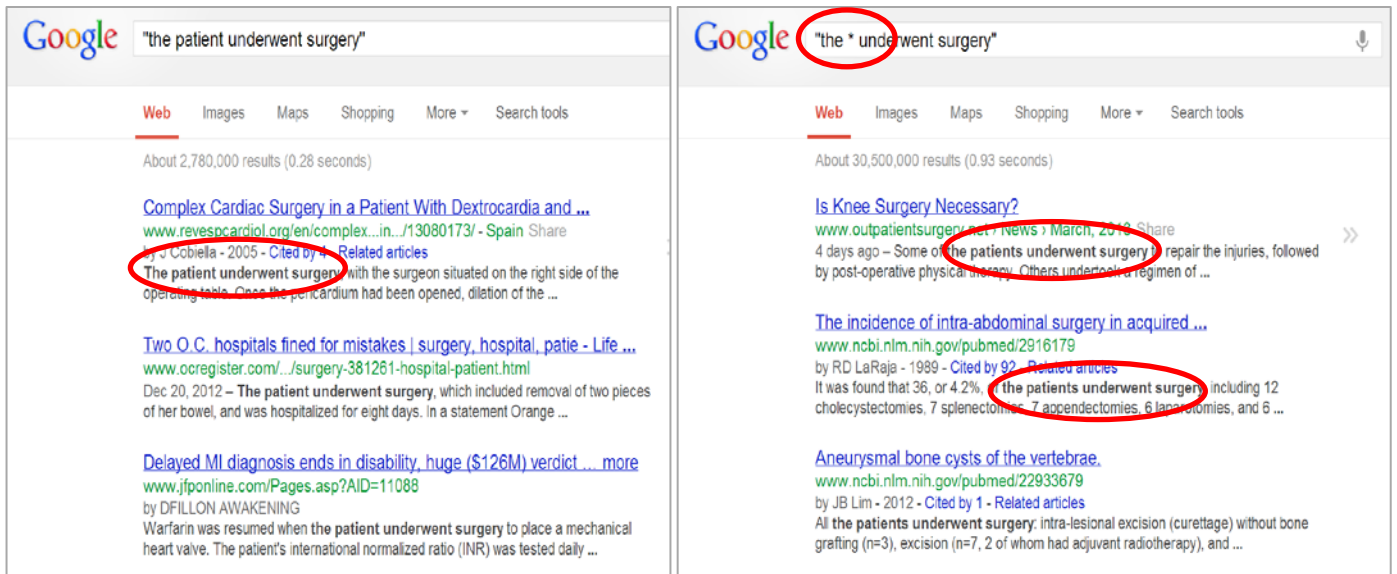
**Figure 2: Asterisk.**

In the box on the left side of Figure 2, the search "the patient underwent surgery" was performed using quotations, and Google showed results that containing that phrase as it was written. In the box on the right, the search "the * underwent surgery" was performed using an asterisk instead of "patient" to see what sort of words could be included in such a phrase. The fact that Google showed many results with the plural word "patients" in place of the asterisk suggests that patient, in singular or plural form, is a common word used together with "underwent surgery."

## Search operator 3: Minus sign (-)

Using the **minus sign** (-) in the Google search bar will cause Google to show results that do not include any words typed *after* the minus sign. The minus sign functions to get rid of results that are not useful to us, like results showing YouTube videos or song lyrics when the phrase we are searching is also the title of a song or movie, for example. We can even chain many minus signs together in the search bar to refine our search results (see Figure 3: Minus sign).
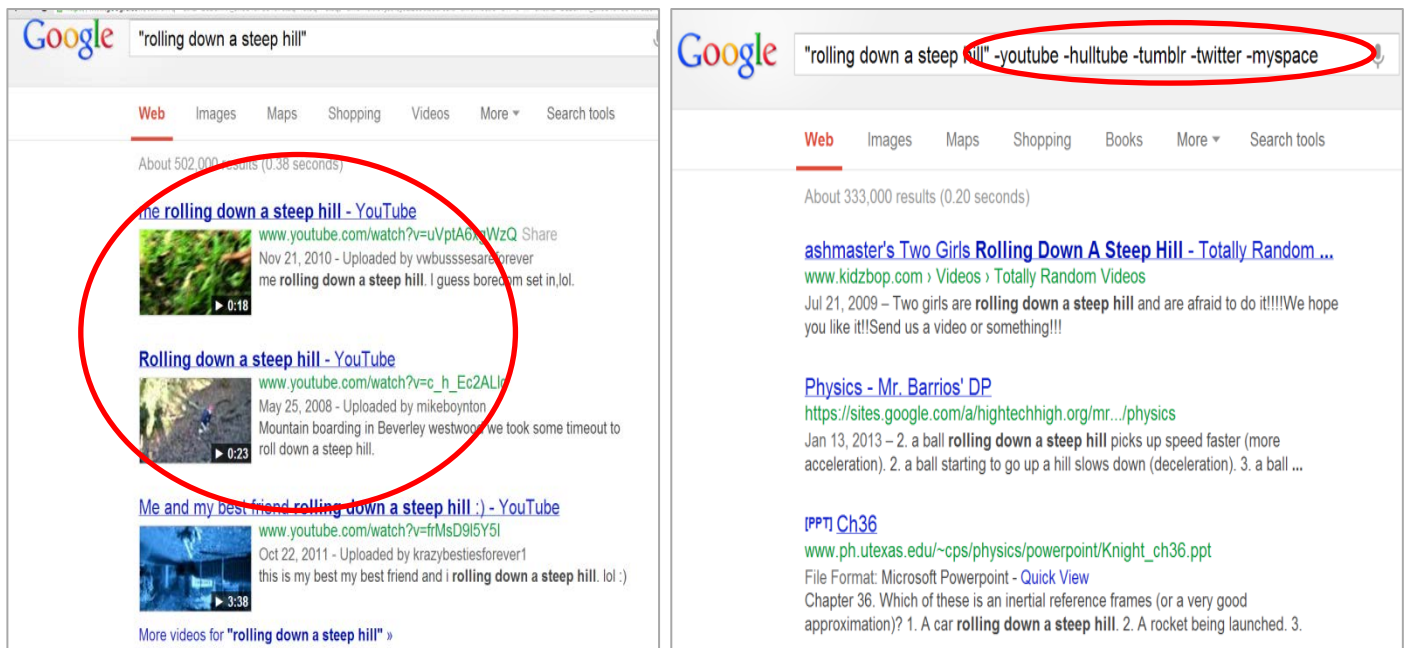
**Figure 3: Minus sign.**

In the box on the left side of Figure 3, the search "rolling down a steep hill" was performed, and the search results contained YouTube videos and results that linked to social networks like Tumblr, Twitter and MySpace. In the box on the right, results that contained YouTube videos or that linked to many social networks were omitted by using the minus sign before each of the terms to be omitted from the search.

# Putting it all together to Google it up

We will focus on two methods for testing phrases with Google: (1) evaluating how the **number** of results changes as we add words to or subtract words from our phrase and (2) assessing the **context** of the sentences containing our phrase in the results of the search.

## Method 1: Evaluating the numbers

Suppose that you want to use a phrase in your writing whose words usually occur in a fixed and sequential order, for example, an idiomatic expression. However, you do not remember the exact words in the phrase or their correct order.

For example, let's say you want to use the idiomatic expression "to put the cart before the horse," meaning "to do/have things in the wrong order." If you say "to put the horse before the cart" (putting the words in the incorrect order) or "to put the cart before the wheel" (mistakenly replacing "horse" for "wheel"), the phrase will sound awkward to your reader.

By running multiple searches of the phrase within quotations—starting with two or three words of the phrase and subsequently "testing" the phrase by adding words one by one—and looking at the number of results, we can determine whether the phrase is correct. (See Figure 4: Number of results.)
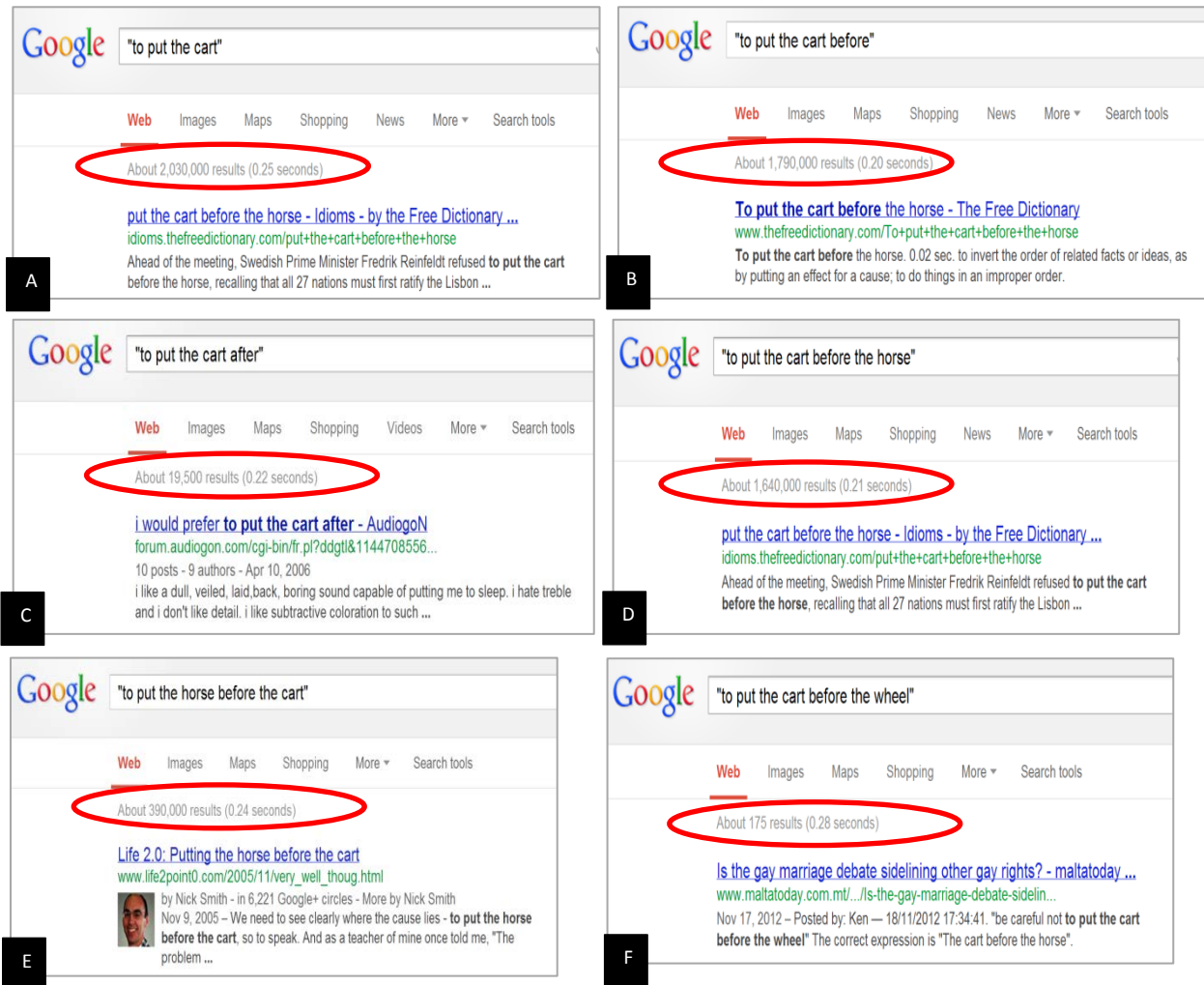


**Figure 4: Number of results.**

In box A, the number of results is about two million for "to put the cart." When in box B we add "before" to the previous phrase, the number of results only drops to 1.8 million, suggesting that 'before' is also a fairly typical part of the phrase. However, in box C, when we add the word "after," the number of results plummets to 20 thousand, a significant drop suggesting that "after" is not part of the expression. In box D, when we add "horse" to the phrase, the number of results remains pretty similar to A and B at 1.6 million, indicating that "horse" is probably a common part of the phrase. When we change the order of the words "cart" and "horse," as in box E, the results drop to 400 thousand. Finally, in box F, if we replace "horse" with "wheel," the number of results drops to almost none: only 175 hits does not make for a likely common expression.

Figure 4 demonstrates that we can use Google to help determine whether the words and word order in the phrase we are testing are correct by looking at the **number of search results** of different combinations of the words in the phrase.

With this "Google it Up" method, we are able to tell what words go together in a phrase, and in what order. When we add appropriate words in the correct order, the Google results stay about the same. However, when we add a word that does not belong to the phrase or mix the order of the words in the phrase, the number of results drops abruptly.

PRO TIP
How much of a drop in the number of results is enough to determine if the phrase is correct? It becomes tricky when you are testing phrases that give a much lower number of results in the first place, and we should never judge the correctness of a phrase by the number of results alone. Nevertheless, when we combine this method with method 2, described below, we can more or less accurately judge if our phrase is correct or not.

## Method 2: Assessing the context

When we perform a Google search of a phrase within quotations, Google gives us a list of results that contain at least one or two sentences or bigger phrases that contain the phrase that we have searched, with the phrase being usually in bold. By analyzing how the phrase appears in the results (specifically, how it is used in sentences or bigger phrases), we can determine whether the phrase is correct. Furthermore, we can learn the context in which our phrase is normally used (i.e. what words or sentences usually precede or follow our phrase) and see if this context matches our expectations.

An important clue to determine whether our phrase exists is if it occurs within a Google result without any punctuation marks between any of the words in the phrase. We can also use the asterisk (*) operator to find what sort of words, if any, can be included within our phrase and to further test the context in which our phrase is used.

Let's see how we can do this by Googling up two phrases we think *might* denote "to quit working or doing something to go home after a long period of work": we'll compare "call it a day" and "name it a day," and then assess the context to see which one is normally used for our purpose (see Figure 5: Assessing the quality of the results).
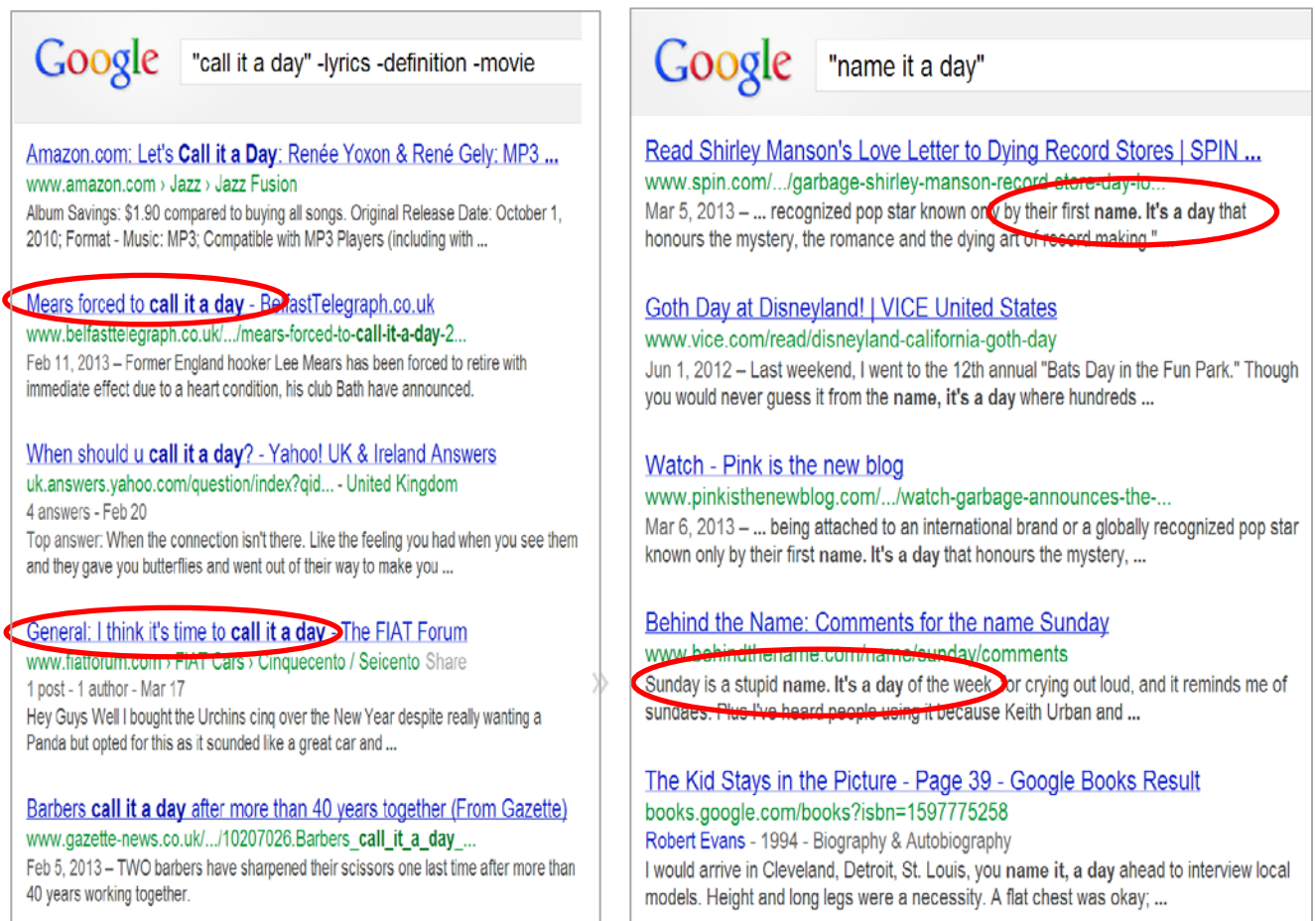
**Figure 5: Assessing the quality of the results.**

In box A, the search "call it a day" was performed, and some terms were eliminated from the search using the minus sign operator to refine the search results. The word groups within the list of results contain the phrase "call it a day" within bigger sentences or phrases, illustrating the context in which this phrase can be used (e.g. following the verbs "let's" or "forced," or around time-related words like "when," "time," and "after." Box B shows the search results experimenting with the phrase "name it a day," in which the word "call" was replaced by "name." These search results contain sentences or phrases in which the words in "name it a day" occur together; however, these words do not occur as a meaningful phrase. In every result, a punctuation mark (comma or period) breaks the phrase into two different sentences or expressions, suggesting that the phrase "name it a day" does not exist as an idiomatic expression.

Figure 5 demonstrates that when the phrase we are testing within quotations does not exist as a phrase in Google, there will usually be punctuation marks in between one or more of the words in the phrase. In the worst case scenario, Google will not have any results for such phrase; in that case, we will have to shorten our phrase by deleting some words, then search again.

| PRO TIP | As we can see in Figure 5, we can learn much about the phrase we are testing by observing what sort of words precede or follow the phrase. If we are not sure about one of the words in the phrase, we can perform a search using the asterisk operator to see |

Available online at [http://writing.umn.edu/sws/assets/pdf/google_it.pdf].

what sort of results come up. For example, searching for "* it a day" will most likely show many results containing the phrase "call it a day."

PRO TIP

Because Google has a commercial rather than academic nature, some searches will only give "commercial results" with little use for us, especially when the words in our phrase contain the name of a movie, video or song. In this case, many results will only contain links to the lyrics of the song or to the trailer of the movie and will offer little to no context for the phrase we are testing.

- When this happens, we can always use the minus sign to narrow our search by getting rid of search results that we do not want, which contain words like "lyrics," "movies," "YouTube," or "Twitter." Keep eliminating words with the minus sign until you start seeing the type of results that you want that offer context for your phrase.
- We can also jump to pages that contain results that show context for our phrase. Usually, the "commercial results" are in the first 4 or 5 pages, and the results that show context start appearing afterwards. Keep shifting through pages until you reach a results page that contains sentences that offer some sort of context for your phrase.

PRO TIP

Sometimes, it's hard to decide on the correct preposition for a prepositional phrase or a phrasal verb. In those cases, try using those words in a phrase enclosed by quotation marks, and replace the mystery preposition with an asterisk. Assess the results by first noting which preposition(s) can be used with those words, and then by examining the context of each version of the phrase to be sure it means what you want it to mean. Another place to check phrasal verbs is [ ].

PRO TIP

You can also use the asterisk operator to look for the type of words that typically precede or follow a certain phrase. Just perform a search of the phrase including an asterisk before or after the part you're wondering about, ensuring that you enclose the whole search in quotation marks.

## Additional considerations

- How many results should you assess to evaluate if your phrase exists or not? It depends. The results of some phrase searches will give enough context to determine relatively quickly whether your phrase exists. However, some other phrase searches will be more ambiguous, giving results that show contexts in which the phrase is actually occurring as a meaningful phrase and others in which it is being broken by punctuation marks. Just keep shifting through pages until you find enough evidence to convince yourself whether your phrase exists.

- The "assessing context" part of the method is very subjective, and you will get better at it the more you practice. Your success will also depend on your previous knowledge of English grammar and how well you know/remember the phrase you are testing. When you combine

your assessment of the phrase and its context with the number of results the search of the phrase gets, you can get a very good estimate of that phrase's existence and correctness.

# A closing note

When you start applying this method, things will be confusing and you may feel that it leads nowhere. However, with enough practice and as you develop your "Google gut feeling," this method can be very reliable and usually faster than looking up a phrase in a dictionary or asking someone else. Furthermore, in today's technological age, devices with access to the internet and Google are ubiquitous, making this method very quickly and easily accessible anywhere at any time.

We hope that you will find this method useful in your career as a student writer and that it will help you hone your writing skills and increase your vocabulary.

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