

Google Like a Librarian¹

Jill Cirasella
Computational Sciences Specialist
Brooklyn College Library
cirasella@brooklyn.cuny.edu

In 2003, *New York Times* op-ed columnist Thomas L. Friedman asked, “Is Google God?” Since, similarities between Google and God have been explored by many, including artificial-intelligence pioneer Ray Kurzweil (Taylor, 2006), novelist Douglas Coupland (Myers, 2006), and mischief-maker Matt MacPherson, founder of the tongue-in-cheek Church of Google (<http://www.thechurchofgoogle.org/>).

Opportunities for goofy wordplay are no doubt a major reason the Google-as-God analogy has gained traction. (The urge to pair “Google” with rhyming and alliterative words can be frighteningly strong. See, for example, the next sentence.) Needless to say, Google is not a god—and, despite its “Don’t Be Evil” motto, it is not all good—but good Googling at the reference desk can leave patrons gratefully and giddily agog.

Of course, not all Googling puts patrons in rapturous states. The key is good Googling. So don’t just Google. Google well. Google knowledgeably. Google creatively. Google like a librarian.

Googling like a librarian involves knowing when to use Google (which of course entails knowing when not to, but that’s a different article), choosing the appropriate Google tool, and using it effectively and efficiently. Many Google products—including Google Scholar, Google Book Search, and Google Maps—are already well understood by librarians and well represented in library and popular literature, and I won’t cover those here. Also, I won’t rehash what I have

¹ Appeared in *The U*N*A*B*A*S*H*E*D[™] Librarian*, 148, 2008, 3-6.
Copyright 2008, *The U*N*A*B*A*S*H*E*D[™] Librarian*, the “*How I Run My Library Good*” lettersm,
P.O. Box 325, Mount Kisco, NY 10549. Reprinted with permission from issue #148.

written elsewhere about why reference librarians should embrace Google and how they can use Google Sets, Google Suggest, and Google Web History, three underappreciated Google tools (Cirasella, 2007b; Cirasella, 2007a). What I will do is discuss a few other Google tools that hold promise for reference work but are likely unfamiliar to some librarians and many patrons.

First, I will describe three special-purpose Google products that have one important thing in common: each has made at least one of my reference patrons jump for joy. Of course, a major reason patrons like these tools so much is the familiar, intuitive Google interface, which makes patrons confident they will be able to use the tools again on their own, without a librarian's help.

- **Google Finance (<http://finance.google.com/>):** After a somewhat slow start, Google Finance is now a spectacular tool, arguably more impressive than Yahoo! Finance, MSN Money, or any other free financial site. Many of its features are better suited to serious investment research than reference interviews, but its interactive charts routinely wow my patrons and, more importantly, give them what they need. These charts correlate a company's stock price history with news stories about the company, and the news stories often reveal the reasons behind the stock price movements. Sometimes these charts give patrons all they need to know; sometimes they provide a starting point for further research.
- **Google Translate (<http://translate.google.com/>):** Google Translate is Google's one-stop shopping page for all of its language tools. In addition to a multilingual dictionary (which is by no means the only multilingual dictionary online, but isn't it easier to go straight to Google's version than to Google for a different one?), Google Translate includes a tool that translates text passages, a tool that translates entire web pages, and a tool that allows users to search the Web in their preferred language for

information in another language—and then gives each search result in both languages. Patrons especially appreciate the translated search tool, which dramatically increases the universe of understandable online information. Like all automatic translation tools, Google Translate often produces awkward or garbled translations, but even imperfect translations can be very valuable.

- **Google Patent Search (<http://www.google.com/patents>):** Just as Google Scholar and Google Book Search are not sufficient for rigorous, comprehensive scholarly research, Google Patent Search is not sufficient for rigorous, comprehensive patent research. For example, Google Patent Search only includes patents from the United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO), not international patent offices. Also, Google Patent Search does not offer as many options as the USPTO search tool (<http://www.uspto.gov/patft/>), and Google's imperfect optical character recognition makes some patents harder to find than they should be. That said, Google Patent Search simplifies some aspects of patent research by allowing full-text searching of all U.S. patents back to 1790 and by prominently listing all patents that cite or are cited by a given patent. Furthermore, Google Patent Search's interface is far superior to the clunky interface of USPTO's search tool, and it engages patrons in a way the USPTO tool doesn't. In other words, Google Patent Search promotes curiosity about inventions, and isn't that exactly what a patent tool should do?

As I said above, Googling like a librarian involves knowing which Google product to use when, and librarians should familiarize themselves with all Google products. For a list of Google products, visit <http://www.google.com/options/>, and for a list of Google products still in development, visit <http://labs.google.com/>.

Next, I will describe a few tools that are not separate Google products but rather features built into Google search. Many people know how to use Google as a dictionary and spell-checker, but fewer are familiar with the many numerical tasks Google can perform. I will focus on the numerical features that I have found useful at the reference desk.

- **Calculator:** Patrons frequently come to the reference desk in search of a calculator.

Whether or not there is a calculator at the reference desk, I prefer to show patrons that they have a calculator whenever they have access to the Web. There are many online calculators, and it's not hard to Google "calculator" and find them. But there's a faster way: save a search and use Google's built-in calculator. Just type the calculation you want to perform into the search box. For example, enter $23 + 57 - 13$, and Google returns 67. Google's calculator can perform many of the functions of a scientific calculator, too. For example, enter $3! + 10^2 - \sqrt{((147 * 34) + 2)/50} + \cos(180 \text{ degrees})$, and Google returns 95.

- **Conversions:** Patrons don't need a conversion calculator as often as they need a regular calculator, but they do sometimes ask about the number of micrograms in a kilogram, the number of centimeters in an inch, the exchange rate between U.S. dollars and British pounds, etc. Again, it's not hard to Google to find rules of conversion and conversion calculators, but it's faster to use Google's built-in conversion tool. To answer the questions listed above, just enter "1 kilogram in micrograms," "1 inch in centimeters," and "1 US dollar in British pounds" (or, abbreviated, "1 kg in mcg," "1 in in cm," and "1 USD in GBP").
- **Time Zones:** Questions about time zones and time differences are not daily occurrences, but I have fielded a few. As with calculators and conversions, it's

perfectly easy to Google “time zone map,” but it is much easier just to Google “time Sydney” or “time Accra.” Google provides the current time in the indicated city, the abbreviation for its time zone, and a list of regular Google results for further research.

As these special features show, good Googling does not always entail a Google search for something. Sometimes, it entails knowing that the thing is built into Google. To learn about Google’s other built-in features, visit <http://www.google.com/intl/en/help/features.html>. Some of them, such as flight tracking and package tracking, are not especially useful for reference work, but they are certainly useful in other aspects of life.

PS: Enough about the Tools. What about the Company?

As a practicing reference librarian, I write primarily about practical aspects of reference librarianship. And indeed, almost everything I wrote above is about what and how, not why and whence. For why and whence, I recommend these two blogs, which together reveal much about Google, Inc., its actions, and the implications of those actions.

- **The Official Google Blog (<http://googleblog.blogspot.com/>):** Part of Google’s public relations machine, the Official Google Blog offers “insights from Googlers into our products, technology, and the Google culture.” Of course, there’s also much to read between the lines about Google’s self-presentation.
- **The Googlization of Everything (<http://www.googlizationofeverything.com/>):** Written by Siva Vaidhyanathan, a cultural historian and media scholar at the University of Virginia, the Googlization of Everything offers “critical interpretation of the actions and intentions behind the cultural behemoth that is Google, Inc.” Read

this blog for smart critical analysis (which is sometimes but not always criticizing) of the company's moves and countermoves.

Additionally, there are numerous product-specific Google Blogs, including a Google Book Search blog (<http://booksearch.blogspot.com/>), a Google Finance blog (<http://googlefinanceblog.blogspot.com/>), and a Google News blog (<http://googlenewsblog.blogspot.com/>). Or, to track a Google-related topic, try Google Alerts (<http://www.google.com/alerts>), Google's version of a news clipping service. Google Alerts emails links to articles, blog posts, and web pages on any topic, even those Google avoids in its blogs, such as Google's tangle with copyright law. And I have to say, there is something delightful about receiving an email from Google with a link to an article that excoriates Google.

References

- Cirasella, J. (2007a). Google Sets, Google Suggest, and Google Search History: Three more tools for the reference librarian's bag of tricks. *Reference Librarian*, 48(1), 57-65.
- Cirasella, J. (2007b). You and me and Google makes three: Welcoming Google into the reference interview. *Library Philosophy and Practice*, 9(3), 1-8.
- Friedman, T. L. (2003, June 29). Is Google God? *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>
- Myers, R. (2006, May 16). Is Google God? *Time*. Retrieved from <http://www.time.com>
- Taylor, C. (2006, January 25). Google is God. *CNN Money*. Retrieved from <http://money.cnn.com>