

Ask HN: Why do search functions everywhere not return what I search for?

44 points by andrewstuart 2 hours ago | hide | past | favorite | 37 comments

It's driving me nuts.

All over the web, search functions don't actually return the word you searched for.

They seem to all do some sort of creative interpretation of what you searched for in the name of "relevance", thereby returning irrelevant results.

And in many cases, there is simply no way to do a literal word search. You'd expect maybe if you put your term in quotes that you would then get back precisely what you search for, but no..... again, the search function comes up with its own creative interpretation somehow.

Ugh why can't search..... search?

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Yea it is truly awful.. e.g. job search has become even worse than it was a few years ago. The only good platform (Stackoverflow) has closed its job search. Most jobs seem to be on LinkedIn these days.

However for a while now LinkedIn job search seemingly shows me random stuff.. I can search for C++ and find all kinds of Java, Javascript, PHP jobs. It is driving me mad.

Any recommendations for job search sites (maybe even with negative filters)? I know about Who is Hiring? of course but there are not too many jobs for my region usually.

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yetihehe 14 minutes ago | parent | next [-]

Search engines use some metric to find relevance to your query. In ye olde days it was "how many words in description matched your query". Now it's typically "how much money did this company give us".

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andrewstuart 25 minutes ago | parent | prev | next [-]

One of the things that triggered this post was I did a search on LinkedIn jobs for "python" and the task of sorting through the seemingly random results to find "python" jobs was too hard so I gave up.

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Elasticsearch or a functionally equivalent competitor is a straightforward commercial-off-the-shelf solution for text search. Default settings for it include fuzzy matching and returning "relevant" results instead of only exact ones.

Pretty sure there's nothing more nefarious going on than a bunch of different engineers and different companies plugging in COTS text search solutions with minimal customization.

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Some kind of weirdness is in almost all search-engines. I recently wondered why our backend search based on SQL Server would not return the expected results, turns out that for some reason, it has a stoplist that includes a ton of Roman numerals (also written out numbers twentyone, twentytwo... I have no idea what the thinking is there), so searching for "Sony Alpha III" is exactly the same as searching for "Sony Alpha IV" because III and IV are neither indexed nor searched for.

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andrewstuart 43 minutes ago | parent | prev | next [-]

Lots of people here saying Elasticsearch can't actually do straightforward literal searches.

Sigh.

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My guess is that if you do user research you'll find that for the vast majority of people exact token matches are not what they actually need or appreciate.

People run searches on their phones with typos. They don't have a good mental model for how search works, or how best to use it. If they search for "can puppy eat pork" they're actually looking for results about if dogs can eat ham.

As an expert user of search this infuriates me too, especially when tricks like double quoting don't get me what I'm looking for.

But as someone who often implements search engines I'm spending a lot more time thinking about fuzzy matches and semantic search (things like searches that use vector embeddings generated by language models).

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Ironic.

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This topic (or a variation of it) comes up quite frequently on HN.

I agree with your observations. Google search seems to completely ignore search terms in quotation marks. It's like the search favours showing somewhat relevant results instead of nothing at all.

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Under normal usage, google will search for synonyms of the keywords you typed. But I have never experienced it ignoring quotes.

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If your term is specific enough it will ignore it the first time around even if in quotes, and you have to click on the "search this term for real" link underneath

Google search is however personalized per user account in mysterious ways, so there's that at play as well

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I rarely use Google, but my experience was always that quoting still worked.

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My theory is that search is, from a ux perspective, seen as a way to generate "browsing" opportunities rather than pinpoint something specific.

At the same time there's a wish for searching for "what you meant" rather than "what you typed".

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Yes, and I see this phenomenon everywhere now. They completely ignore the explicit instructions we are giving and prioritize their "suggestions" instead. Facebook, Twitter with their default timeline views. On Twitch's TV app it used to be one click from the main page to continue watching a video now it's 5 clicks because they replace with suggested channels, recommended blah blah.

One can go blue in the face "quoting" terms on Amazon search but they'll just show whatever they want anyways completely ignoring the exact terms entered. I'd prefer them to say "we couldn't find any results for you" than to give me pages of useless results instead.

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They completely ignore the explicit instructions we are giving and prioritize their "suggestions" instead.

I suspect it's deliberate. They're more interested in giving you what *they* want and trying to coerce you into that direction. I absolutely abhor it.

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These types of searches are built for normie users who are likely to not search for exactly one thing, and would find a relevant result good enough. Not to absolve conflicts of interest, but this is simply what you get with giant mainstream monolithic products like Google or Amazon. They optimize for the normal distribution.

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Partly deliberate revenue maxxing, partly SEO infosphere pollution, and partly the underlying technical elements of poorly (for the user) implemented embeddings, that have now largely replaced keyword based search. Tldr of the latter mechanism is multiple words share the same vector space representation so you often don't get what you want, but always you get what the model suggests you need. https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Word_embedding

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On Amazon, sorting by anything other than "Featured" is absolutely useless.

Instacart will show a couple of relevant items, and then a bunch absolutely random results, some of them being the opposite of what I asked for.

A lot of that is coming from optimizing for conversion. Turns out search isn't supposed to be accurate, it is supposed to generate money. You just happen to be the minority that cares about the *exact* thing.

Another reason is that search is just... hard.

Though in Amazon's case I bet it's just sheer incompetence caused by monopoly.

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It could be that everyone just delegates to elastic search or similar which I think might be incapable of exact string searching (a trade off to get better fuzzy searching and speed). Tuning ES is probably possible but takes commitment and is complicated I suspect most don't bother! I used it in one side project and a lot of tuning is needed for your use case.

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The vast majority of users are not technical. They don't want keyword search, they want to find the information they're looking for. In that sense, they treat a search box more as a chatbot rather than a literal search tool. That is, they want something more like ChatGPT, not Google. That Google doesn't yet offer this functionality is incidental (it does sometimes and for limited use cases, such as surfacing weather details or lyrics, not pages with the literal words "X weather" or "Y lyrics").

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andrewstuart 53 minutes ago | [parent](#) | [next](#) [-]

Lots of developers in this thread saying users aren't technical and don't want literal search.

I'll need evidence before I believe these assertions.

I think users want literal search first.

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Talk to a group of ten or a hundred non technical people, do a comparison of a literal search engine versus a non literal search engine and record their satisfaction rates.

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It's your assertion - have you done that research?

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Anecdotaly? Yes, but since it seems you want evidence which my mere mentioning of anecdotal experimentation is likely not to suffice for your edification, feel free to conduct the same experiment and find the same findings as I have.

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As someone who wrote a very silly and small search system with an elastic search backend.. this thing is a bit complicated.

If I do exact match for single words life is easy

Once you add phrases or punctuation and tell elastic search to find the best match (text analysis) then life isn't so simple anymore. It feels a bit like magic and I honestly cannot be bothered to become a language expert to know how to tune the machinery. The docs aren't great also.

Maybe there's a missing middle ?

Of course that if you're talking about social media, or search focused companies, they likely have other interests

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> this thing is a bit complicated.

Oh gods. I wrote our public search backend in ES a few years ago, then months of fine-tuning followed (whenever one of my coworkers searched and weren't happy with the result). Today I barely understand what anything in the code is doing, but the results are good...

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From my experience implementing search using Solr (or Elasticsearch) is simple to get the basics and hard to get really really good. So I guess most developers/companies are satisfied with "good enough".

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I guess you know the answer, and it has been mentioned several times already: search is "bad" from the seller's point of view, they don't want you to buy what you want. Instead they want you to buy what they want to sell, and that is of course easier if they control the presentation of products. Search is an explicit way of trying to give control over what is shown to the user, and that runs counter to the underlying optimization for maximum sales.

At least I guess so, the nearest I have been to any kind of sales optimization pipeline is buying a lot of stuff online. :)

Smaller and niche sites can still do Real Search, but it's the large marketplaces with thousands of everything (where, you know, you *really want good search*) that usually instead favor their own optimization.

Actually, but perhaps surprisingly, a site like Aliexpress actually kind of explain this in their search help text, which is at least trying to be transparent. I like that, but it still drives me *nuts* when the search results change when you change to sort by price. That's like ... "impossible" in my mind; changing the presentation order of a list should not change the contents o of the list, but there you are.

Aargh, basically. I wish it could stop.

Applying Standard Capitalist Rules, I guess in the future you'll need to pay a fee to each site for the right to search and sort exactly and disable the optimizations for you. Fun times.

EDIT: Minor grammar fix.

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I often find that too, that it doesn't work. I tried different search engines and they tend to have some advantages and some disadvantages, but overall, it does not help. (Although, some things might just be obscure and difficult to find anyways, possibly; and, sometimes, it is difficult to know what search terms to use. But, sometimes even if I know what is needed and put it in exactly, still it does not work.)

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Oh it's the engineers who think they know better than the common man/woman. Elitist, snobbish etc.

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I agree. I actually want literal search most of the time. Not the smart kind.

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And it keeps getting worse!

No solutions, but I empathize and it drives me nuts too.

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In Google put your phrase in quotes and it'll find the exact word or words

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Sometimes that helps (I use quotation marks very often since it helps enough that it is worth doing), but somehow it does not always help.

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Sometimes.

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Because search results are super competitive and they bombard SE with highly optimized tactics to rank higher even for irrelevant terms.

As as suggestion, try searching (or asking for recommendations) on ChatGPT for the same keyword

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Yes, it's terrible, happens all the time

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Search: