

# Wolfram|Alpha: A Weird Name, But a Valuable Resource on the Web

By David Narkiewicz

## What is Wolfram|Alpha?

Wolfman Jack was a famous disc jockey. “Werewolves of London” was a song by Warren Zevon. Wolfram|Alpha—what the heck is that?

Wolfram|Alpha, found at [www.wolframalpha.com](http://www.wolframalpha.com), is a new computational knowledge engine that is blowing away Google and other search engines for certain precise searches. Why? Because it generates output by doing computations using its own internal knowledge base, not by searching the Internet and returning links to sites. In other words, Wolfram|Alpha gives you the answer, not other locations to possibly find the answer. Wolfram|Alpha is strongest in searching areas involving computation or mathematics where knowledge is more quantitative.

## How Does Wolfram|Alpha Work?

With a Google search, you type a string of words and Google searches the entire Internet and comes back with listings of websites with the highest common denominator for the words you used. As we all know, sometimes those sites have nothing to do with what we’re looking for. Even

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—JoAnn Hathaway and Diane Ebersole,  
Practice Management Advisors

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worse, Google accepts paid advertising, so often the top sites listed in a search paid for that privilege. Wolfram|Alpha searches its own extensive database and works best when only a few words are used in the search. Unlike Google, if you type your name in Wolfram|Alpha, it likely will come back with nothing.

## What Can Wolfram|Alpha Do for Lawyers That Google Cannot?

Wolfram|Alpha will give you a short, precise answer in seconds rather than a list of 20 sites that you must open and read, possibly finding the answer you were looking for. Examples of topics that lawyers may want to use Wolfram|Alpha for include:

- **Dates and times:** Wolfram|Alpha will tell you the exact present time, the time of sunrise, and when sunset will be for your location. It will give you a monthly calendar for any month and year. It will compute any number of days from a certain date (helpful with statutes of limitations or the date an answer to a motion is due) and can tell you on what day of the week you were born.
- **Weather:** Wolfram|Alpha will give you the present weather for your location or any location in the world and historical weather, such as what the weather was like during the entire day for any location on any date you choose in the last 50 years (helpful to personal-injury lawyers who want to know quickly what the weather was like on the date of an accident). By searching the location of your birth and birth date, you can even find out exactly what the weather was like when you were born.
- **Mathematics:** Wolfram|Alpha can perform mathematical calculations ranging

from simple (addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, and percentages) to complex (algebra, calculus, and geometry).

- **Money and finance:** Wolfram|Alpha will do mortgage calculations, compute yearly salary equivalents from hourly wages, convert the dollar into almost any foreign currency either now or historically as of a certain date, and give you the applicable sales tax for a certain city. It even gives you up-to-the-minute trade quotes on stocks.
- **Places and geography:** Wolfram|Alpha can generate a map for any country, state, and most cities. It can provide detailed information about a place simply by typing the zip code, and it compares statistics about certain cities.
- **Health and medicine:** Wolfram|Alpha will compute blood alcohol content for a specified number of drinks over a given length of time by a person of a certain weight and can provide information about a particular drug or medical tests.
- **Sports and games:** This is still a work in progress, but Wolfram|Alpha can give you various statistics for professional sports franchises, such as plotting the touchdown passes by the Detroit Lions since 1970 to the present (18 in 1970 to 18 in 2008, with 32 being the high in 1995).

## Who is Wolfram?

Stephen Wolfram is the CEO of Wolfram Research and the founder of Wolfram|Alpha. Dr. Wolfram received his PhD in theoretical physics at the age of 20 and has been involved in using computers since 1973. Wolfram|Alpha is his ambitious, long-term project to make as much of the world’s knowledge as possible computable and accessible to everyone.

## Can Lawyers Cite Wolfram|Alpha as a Source?

Wolfram|Alpha became publicly available over the Internet in May 2009. It certainly can be cited as a source, but with the understanding that it is still in its infancy. Most of its knowledge is computational, but to the extent it relies on data from other sources it does a nice job of citing where that data comes from most of the time.

## Where Can I Find More Information About Wolfram|Alpha?

There is a plethora of information about Wolfram|Alpha at [www.wolframalpha.com](http://www.wolframalpha.com). I suggest starting with the “About” page and reading what its goals are, then visiting the “Examples” page to read about the various general topics covered and how to do searches in each area, and then reading the “FAQs” page to learn more.

## Conclusion

I have found Wolfram|Alpha to be nothing short of amazing, and I have barely touched on the power of this computational knowledge engine. I suggest that every lawyer try it out. There will be more than a few features that you can use regularly in your practice or your personal life. It does take practice to do a search, but once you learn how, it is very easy. Go to the “Examples” page for suggestions if you are having difficulty with a particular search. Happy searching! ■

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*David Narkiewicz is assistant chief counsel in charge of litigation for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Department of General Services in Harrisburg. Dave is a member of the Pennsylvania Bar Association's Technology Task Force. He can be reached at [dnarkiewic@state.pa.us](mailto:dnarkiewic@state.pa.us). The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and in no way represent the opinion of the Pennsylvania Bar Association or the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and are not an official endorsement of any product.*