GIS Tips & Tricks

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Need Help Finding GIS Tools – Here are a Few Tips

At some time, everyone comes to a point where they need help finding something that they know they have used before, but just cannot find. I frequently tell my students that "GOOGLE knows everything, so just ask GOOGLE!" GOOGLE is available 24/7 while I am available, hit or miss, so… What to do when GOOGLE cannot answer your question, or you know that you have used a GIS tool but just can't remember where to find it.

The solution is actually pretty simple, don't go to the "Help Menu"; use the Search functions. Here are some of Savannah's and my tips for (1) finding and (2) using the Search functions effectively.

FOR ARCGIS DESKTOP:

In ArcGIS Desktop there are multiple ways to open the Search functions. For those who prefer keyboard shortcuts, the <CTRL>-+F combination will open the search dialog box. For those who prefer mouse clicks, the Search dialog can be accessed from either the Geoprocessing tab (Figure 1) or the Windows tab (Figure 2) on the Main toolbar.
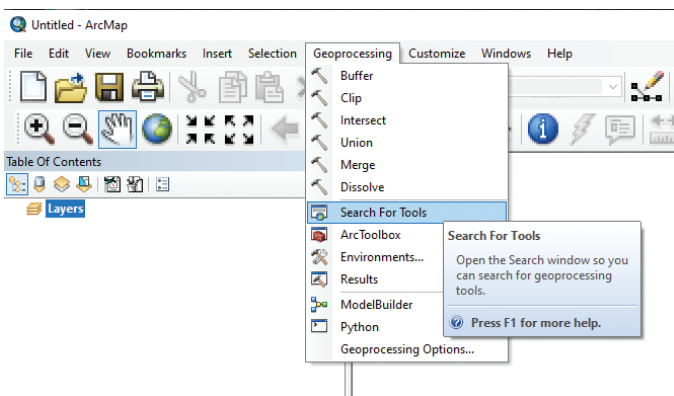
Once the Search dialog (Figure 3) opens, there are multiple tabs across the top to choose from for the search. Using the "All" tab will search for all objects in the ArcGIS environment containing the EXACT character string that you type. This can be extremely frustrating, particularly when you make a small typo (which we often do) as in the example in Figure 4, where a small typo, entering **raser** rather than **raster**, in the search yielded no results!
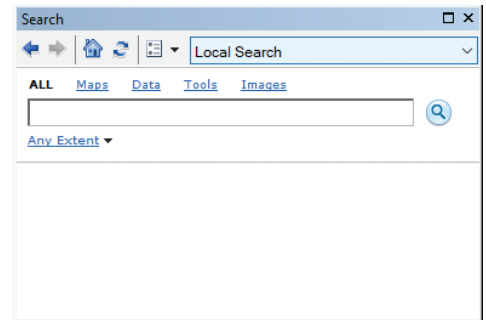

Figure 3. The Search dialog showing multiple tab filters acr000ss the top. The ALL filter tab is chosen in this example.
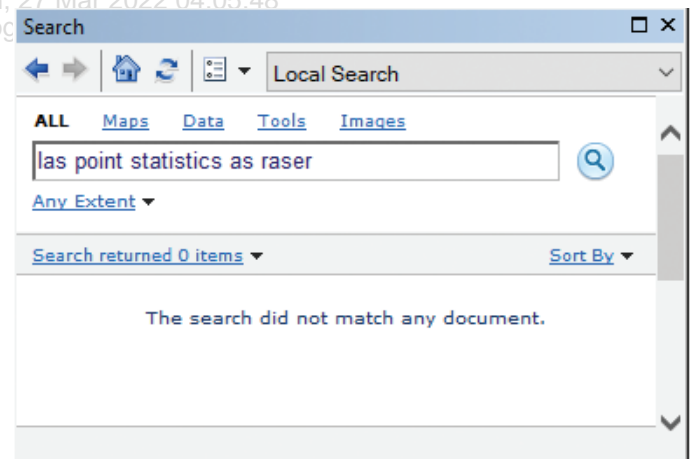

Figure 1. Accessing the Search functions from the Geoprocessing tab.

Figure 4. A small typo, raser instead of raster, in the search string failed to yield any results.

Figure 2. Accessing the Search functions from the Windows tab.

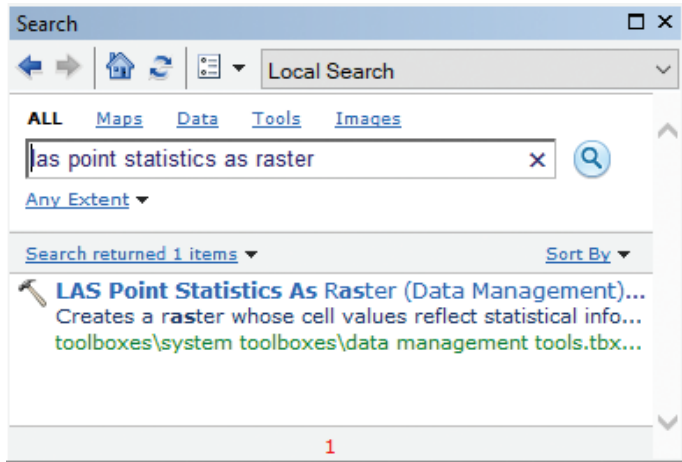When the typo was corrected, the search yielded the location to the desired tool as in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Correcting the typo, raster, not raser, in the search string yielded the desired tool.

TIP: An alternative is to search for tools using the Tool filter tab on the Search dialog. When using this tab, the search functions parses the search string as you type and offers suggestions to complete the string, as shown in Figure 6.
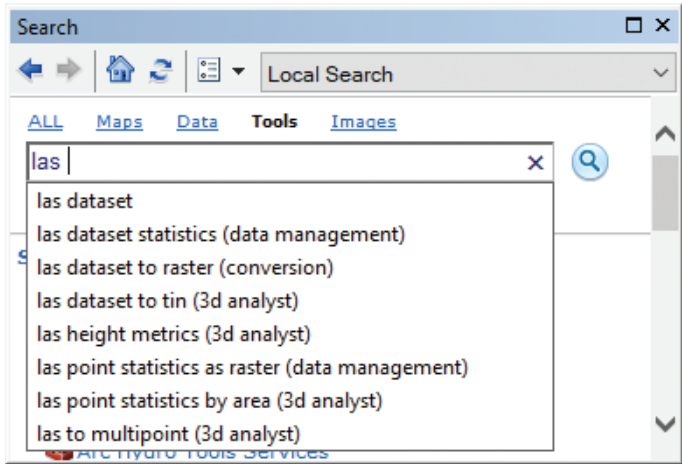

Figure 6. Using the Tools tab in the Search dialog box to search for tools.

FOR ARCGIS PRO

In ArcGIS Pro, the Geoprocessing tools are accessed through the "Analysis" Tab on the ribbon (Figure 7). Here, there are several "ready-to-use" tools and multiple ways to customize the tool groupings. But to search for a specific tool, clicking on the Tools icon will open the Geoprocessing dialog (Figure 8). Typing in the *Find Tools* box functions much like the ArcGIS Desktop search with the Tools filter and immediately starts to locate tools containing the character string and offers the options (Figure 9).
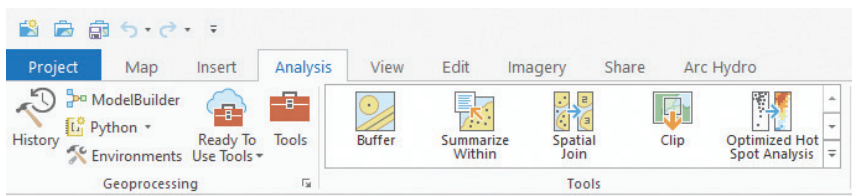

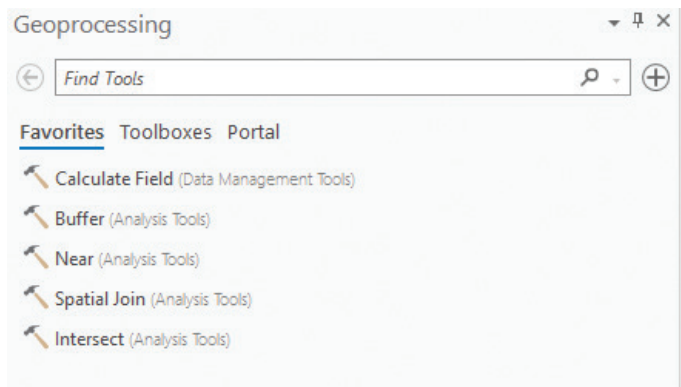Figure 7. The "Tools" icon on the ArcGIS Pro Analysis Tab.

Figure 8. The Geoprocessing Dialog is used to Find Tools in ArcGIS Pro.
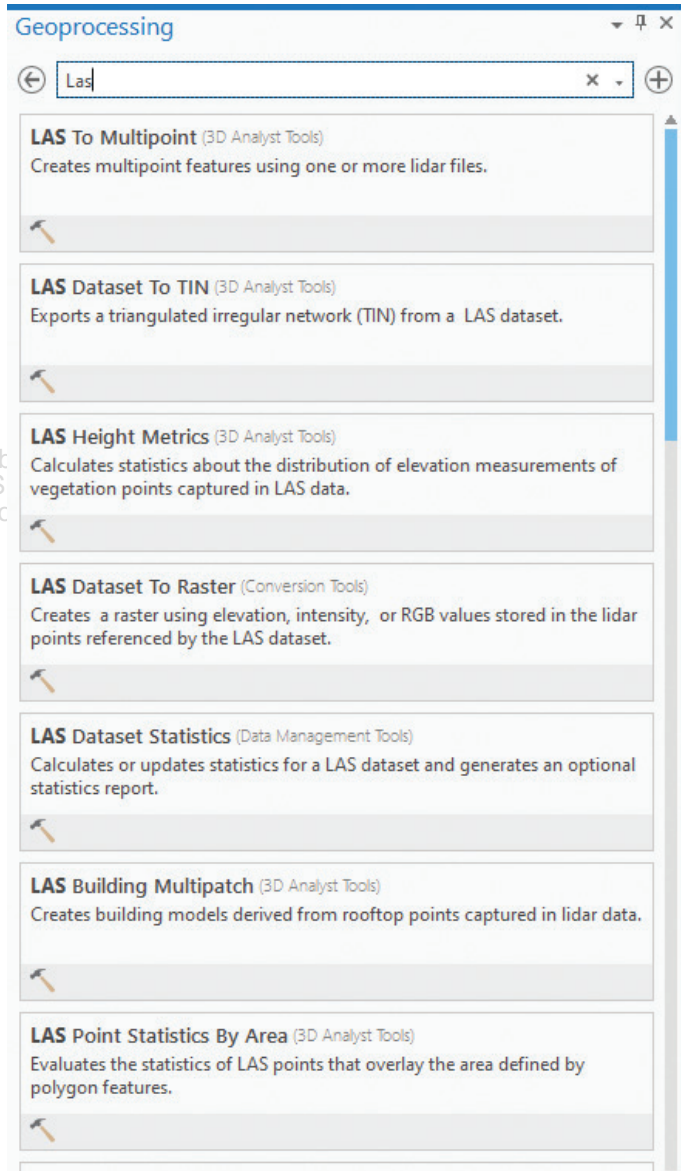

Figure 9. Typing in the Find Tools starts ArcGIS Pro to search for tools matching the character string while you type and offers list of tools to choose from.

IN QGIS

In most versions of QGIS, the search for a processing tool is much the same as in ArcGIS Pro. The Processing Toolbox is opened from the Main Menu on the "Processing" tab as in Figure 10 or by the key combination <CTRL>+<ALT>+T.
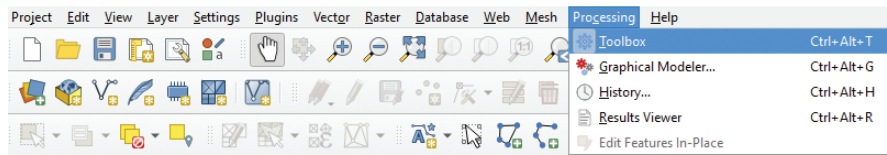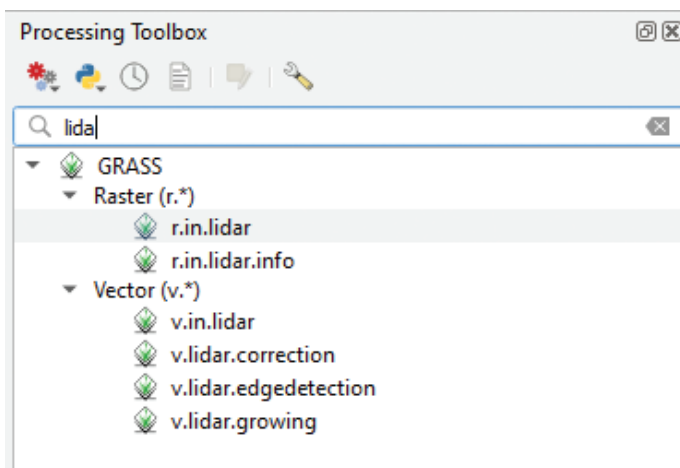
Once the Processing Toolbox is opened, the search area at the top of the toolbox will initiate searching as you type. In the example below (Figure 11), I started typing "lidar", got as far as "lida" and the search engine suggested two raster and four vector tools, much like the ArcGIS Pro tool above. Double-clicking on a tool will open its dialog box.

Figure10.   QGIS Processing Tab opens the Toolbox.

Figure 11. A search in QGIS for "lida" found 6 possible tools.

Not all GIS packages behave the way described above. In GlobalMapper the "Search" functions search for character strings in tables, names in files and/or geographic locations. So be aware of what your software does when you start searching.

Send your questions, comments, and tips to GISTT@ASPRS.org.

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