

Online Searching Techniques

I. To Narrow Searches

A. Boolean AND

1. Joins together unique concepts, phrases or key terms
i.e. good and evil and movies
2. All of the terms must be present in your search results
3. The more terms combined with AND, the more narrow and focused your results will be.

B. Boolean NOT

1. Narrows your search by eliminating key terms or phrases from your search results.
i.e. motion pictures NOT television
2. The above search will only retrieve documents containing the phrase motion pictures and will eliminate all documents containing the word television.
3. So, if you had an article called “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Heroes & Villains in Motion Pictures and Television”, it will be eliminated with the above search.

C. Limiting

1. By date of publication
2. To a specific magazine title
3. To full-text articles
4. By a specific publication type
5. By language
6. These options and others are usually available only in the advanced or guided search mode.

D. By Subject Heading

1. Sometimes limiting by subject heading will retrieve less, but sometimes it will retrieve more.
2. The subject headings are also sometimes referred to as “descriptors”, “fixed vocabulary”, or “controlled vocabulary”.
3. This search uses the same language as the database. When an indexer enters a new article into the database they assign it a subject heading. The subject headings are already predetermined so that all articles relating to the same topic will be given the same subject heading. Why do indexers do crazy things like this? Well, the reasoning behind it is that when a researcher uses that subject heading to search the database, ideally they will be able to find all the relevant material on their topic. Nutty, huh?

E. Use Narrower Search Terms

Substitute narrower terms for your broader terms. For example, use higher education instead of simply education.

F. Phrase Search

You can search words together as a phrase by putting quotation marks around the words, such as “family planning”. This will assure that these words are found next to each other.

II. To Broaden Searches

A. Boolean OR

1. Used to combine synonyms- tells the database that two or more terms can be used interchangeably
i.e. motion pictures or movies or film
2. Any or all of the terms could be present in your search results.
3. You may use a Boolean OR search as part of a Boolean AND search.
i.e. good and evil and (motion pictures or movies or film)

B. Truncation

1. Use a symbol at the end of the root form of a word to search for all variant endings.
i.e. hero? will retrieve hero, heroic, heroism, heroes, heroine, also heroin, etc.
2. Sometimes can be useful for “covering all your bases”, but might retrieve irrelevant info as in above example, might get articles on the drug heroin.
3. Different databases use different truncation symbols. Look in the database’s online help to find the appropriate symbol.
4. Some databases will automatically look for variant endings making truncation unnecessary.

C. Wildcards

1. Use a symbol to replace a letter within a word to find variant spellings or the singular and plural form of certain words.
i.e. wom*n will find woman or women
2. Different databases use different wildcard symbols. Check the online help.
3. Some databases will automatically look for variant spellings, singular and plural forms of a word.

D. By Subject Heading

See above under narrowing searches

E. Use Broader Search Terms

Substitute broader search terms for terms that may be too narrow. For example, use higher education instead of college.