

Searching Tips for Online Databases

General Searching Tips:

Plan your Search:

- Decide which database(s) is most appropriate for the search question. See the “Database by Subject Area” guide for assistance with this.
- Brainstorm for possible search terms before doing anything else. Take into consideration synonyms as well as related terms and subjects. For example death penalty and capital punishment or Adolescents and teenagers.
- Be as specific as possible. Take into consideration multiple uses of the same word. (example: bat = baseball or animal)

Determine the Type of Search Needed:

- Subject Searching: Use this method of searching when the search can be expressed as “show me articles about” a topic. Effective topics for a subject search are broader and more general in their focus. Searches should be for one or two words only. A subject search involves searching only in the subject field of the database so the results of subject searches tend to be more relevant than the results of keyword searches.
- Keyword or Advanced Searching: Use this method of searching when searching for a specific or a narrowly focused topic. Searches can be for multiple words and/or phrases. A keyword search involves searching the entire article so the results can sometimes include irrelevant or seemingly unrelated information. Keyword searches allow for the creation of complex searches through the use of Boolean Searching.

Use Boolean Search Strategies:

And - narrows a search and decreases the number of hits that will be found... Both search words must be in the search results. Example: endangered species and Africa. This search will result in information only about endangered species that are found in Africa.

Or - broadens a search and increases the number of hits that will be found. Just one or both of the words can be in the search results. Use for synonyms, abbreviations, and acronyms. Example: AA or Alcoholics Anonymous. This search will result in information about Alcoholics Anonymous whether the article used the acronym or the complete phrase.

Not - narrows a search by excluding. Use this to eliminate a certain aspect of the topic. The first search word but not the second must be in the search results. Example: eating disorders not female. This search will result in information about eating disorders not related to females. This search would make it easier to focus on articles which discuss the occurrence of eating disorders in males.

"" - quotation marks define a phrase. Use quotation marks when searching for a specific name or phrase. The use of quotation marks indicates to the search tool that all words within the quotation marks must be searched for as specified.