Searching in Databases: Tips & Strategies

Tip #1

Advanced Search

Using the Advanced Search option in a database allows you to construct a very specific search statement and set limits.

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Tip #2

Faceted Searching

Many databases now offer faceted searching which allows you to refine your search results. You can often find these limiting facets in the sidebar positions of your browser window. Common ways to limit include:

- By TYPE (books, audio-visual, peer-reviewed, etc.)
- By COLLECTION
- By CREATOR
- By SUBJECT
- By CALL NUMBER

Tip #3

Keyword v. Subject

**KEYWORD** searching uses key concepts that describe what you are researching. Be as specific as possible, however, you will sometimes need to “back out” and use a broader keyword(s). Keyword searching instructs the database to search many fields (and sometimes the full text) of a record and therefore can return many irrelevant records.

**SUBJECT** searching is when you use a database’s subject terms (sometimes called subject headings or descriptors) to collate all records that share a subject. Subject searches typically return fewer results and more relevant records.

If you don’t know the **subjects** used by a database, begin with a **keyword** search and then take note of **subjects** the database recommends and those attached to interesting records.

Tip #4

Boolean Operators

Connect search terms with **Boolean Operators**. Here is how they work:

**AND**
- All search terms must be part of a record
- Use to narrow your search results

**OR**
- Search will return records with at least 1 of the terms
- Good to use for synonyms (college OR university)
- Use to expand your search results

**NOT**
- Eliminates a term from the search results

Tip #5

Truncation

Use **truncation** (truncat*) to search for variant spellings. For example, architect* will retrieve architect, architects, architecture, architectural

Use quotation marks to search for an **“exact phrase.”** This is especially useful when you’re searching for a known item, like a book or journal title, and it will help you eliminate unwanted search results. For instance, searching for the state “New Mexico” (with quotation marks) will eliminate unwanted search results about the country Mexico.