

Basic Search Techniques

This handout explains basic search techniques common to most computer-generated search applications. These techniques can be used to search for books, articles, websites, and other resource material, on any given topic.



Start with a good topic idea Think of some key subject words and build a topic vocabulary from there. Topics which are too broad or too narrow may need to be rethought. Keep your goal in mind. What are you looking for? Statistics? Research? Literary criticism? Be as exact as you can, in order to get just what you want.

HINT: Use academic words in your search to retrieve academic content in your results.

Use correct spelling Many people are bad spellers, in a big hurry, or both. If you're getting zero results, a spelling error might be the reason. Some search software now provides spell check; some have built-in dictionaries to look words up. Use a print dictionary if you need to. Check for spelling variations.

Use correct meaning If one of your search words has two very different meanings, you may get unexpected results. Consider the meaning of the words you choose. Add on a synonym or two to your original search word, to make sure your intended meaning is the one that you get results on.

Use quote marks or parentheses to hold multi-word phrases or names together, so each word doesn't get searched separately, resulting in too many hits. You are telling the software to find those exact words, in that exact sequence. For example, a search which reads "Dow Jones" or (Dow Jones) will only find the Jones that has Dow in front of it, not every Jones.

Use an asterisk (*) or a question mark (?) to truncate a word. For all variants after the beginning of a word For example searching for **compute?** will find **compute, computed, computer and computers**. Some databases use the *, some use the ? Use the Help screen to determine which method is used.

Use upper case when appropriate. Using initial capital letters for proper nouns is always a good idea.

All search software has a HELP section for answering questions, finding out about that software's unique features, or getting into advanced searching techniques. You can usually open and run two versions of the software at once: one which runs the application and one which stays in the HELP screen, so you can refer to HELP without leaving your search.

Most results of searching are sorted by relevance This means that the links at the top of the result list will be to articles where your search words appear most frequently. Some software ranks results on timeliness, with the latest publication dates at the top. Others offer you options for sorting.

Be aware of date limitations Most online databases only index material as far back as the mid to early 80's. There is usually a way to set dates for how far back you want to search. If you need information older than the date scope of the software, go to print indexes. Ask the Reference Librarian for help.

Formatting Your Search Phrase

A simple search may consist of just one word, but most research for college-level papers will consist of two or more words. These can be topics, subject headings, names of people or places, titles of books, or movies, or multi-word phrases. For now, we'll just refer to them all as topics. **Connectors** are the words you use between your topic words, to get more exact results. Most databases employ traditional "Boolean operators" (AND, NOT, and OR). Search engines on the Internet usually use symbols, such as the plus (+) key and the minus (-) key, instead of words. Sound confusing? It's not really, if you understand the basic concepts.

AND The word AND is used to tell the search software that you want information on one or more related segments of a topic. Example: You are considering getting a cat to keep your dog company and you need to find information on whether cats and dogs get along as pets in the same household. You would type :
cats and dogs

NOT The word NOT is used to tell the search software that you want information on one specific segment of a topic. Example: You want a pet, but you're allergic to cats. You would type :
pets not cats

OR The word OR is used to tell the search software that you want information on either of two or more topics. Warning: this will result in a large number of results. Example: You want a pet, but you can't decide between a cat or a dog. You would type :
cats or dogs

Search engines on the Internet

If possible use the ADVANCED SEARCH search screen for the most options.

Remember, a HELP button is available at each search engine's main page. When you are using the same one or two search engines most of the time, it's a good idea to become familiar with all the features available to you.

Searching but not finding? If you've determined that spelling and meaning are not the problem, and you're just not getting enough results, you'll need to think of alternate/additional words, and/or combinations of words, to use for searching. Sometimes using a thesaurus, subject-specific glossary, or encyclopedia, can help. Again, here is where your friendly librarian can be your best resource.

Whether in electronic or print form:

Books are good resources for background material. **Magazines/journals** are published monthly & weekly; recent articles are good for up-to-date developments, statistics, current government policy, interviews with the major players, charts and graphs, and quotable comments. **Daily newspapers** are good for updates, newly enacted legislation, political agendas, and late-breaking changes. **Websites** can include all of this and more, but choose them carefully (see our Evaluating a Website handout for more info). Using a variety of source types is always a good idea!

Disclaimer: Not all of these tips and shortcuts will work everywhere. Ask for help if needed.