

# Database Search Tips and Tricks

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The following tips can be applied when you search in most databases, including [library catalogs](#), [periodical indexes/databases](#), and even [web search engines](#). Each database may have its own unique search rules. Look for [Help Screens](#) to learn more.

## ◆The Basics

The following may seem obvious, but what you type into the database search box directly affects the outcome of the search.

- Spell all words correctly
- Don't capitalize proper nouns
- Don't use punctuation
- Don't use natural language phrases; in other words, as you would speak. (See "Phrase Searching" later in this handout for exceptions to this rule.)

## ◆Keyword Searching

What is it?

A computer program indexes "significant" words used within the title, summary, or text of an article. All of these words are "searchable." When you type in one or more of these significant words into a search box, this is called Keyword Searching.

Advantages:

- You can find articles containing new terms, distinctive words or jargon.

Examples: *e-commerce, hip-hop, jazzed, hyped, bummed out*

Disadvantages:

- You must search under a variety of words and word variations.  
Example: enter *child, children, kids, boys, or girls* for information on children
- You may get incorrect results or FALSE DROPS.

Example: if you are searching for the *psychological aspects of depression in children*, you may retrieve records that have nothing to do with your topic such as this title "*American Lives: Looking Back at the Children of the Great Depression*"

## ◆Ways to Make Your Searches More Precise

### 1. Use Boolean Operators

What are they?

Boolean operators are words (connectors) placed between search terms to narrow or expand a search. Always use Boolean operators when you search using more than one word or phrase at a time.

**AND:** Helps to Narrow a Search

The **and** operator tells the computer that both terms must be present in the record. The terms may or may not be in a phrase. The more terms that are linked with an **and** operator, the smaller the results will be.

Example: children  
children and depression  
children and depression and medication  
children and depression and medication and Prozac

### OR: Helps to Broaden a Search

The **or** operator is used for like or synonymous terms. Using it tells the computer that either (any) term must be present in the record. The more terms connected with the **or** operator, the larger the results will be.

Example: children or adolescents or teens or kids  
(children or adolescents or teens or kids) and depression  
(children or adolescents or teens or kids) and (depression or antidepressants)

### NOT: Helps to Narrow a Search

The **not** operator eliminates an unwanted search term or group of search terms from the search results.

Example: children not teens  
(children not teens) and depression  
(children not teens) and depression not antidepressants

### Boolean Operators -- Danger! Warning!

When you enter two search terms without using a connector (AND, OR, NOT), be aware that the database may **automatically** be set up to do one of three things.

1. **Implied AND:** Searches for records containing all of the terms.

Example: typing in *ozone layer depletion* may really mean *ozone AND layer AND depletion*

2. **Implied OR:** Searches for items containing any of the terms. (Often employed by Web search engines resulting in thousands of records.)

Example: typing in *ozone layer depletion* may really mean *ozone OR layer OR depletion*

3. **Implied Phrase Searching:** Searches for a phrase, i.e., 2 or more words that are adjacent and in the exact order.

Example: typing in *ozone layer depletion* may actually mean *ozone layer depletion*

If in doubt, use a Boolean operator!

### 2. Try Truncation!

#### What is it?

Truncation allows you to search the "root" form of a word with all its different endings by adding a symbol to the end of a word. Using truncation saves time, as you don't have to repeat searches with multiple variations of the same word.

Truncation: Helps to broaden a search.

Example: typing in *bank\** will retrieve results with these words: **bank, banks, banking, bankers, bankruptcy**

The most common truncation symbol is the asterisk \* but databases vary. Check the database Help section to find the correct truncation symbol.

Example: *bank\* bank! bank# bank?*

### 3. Try Phrase Searching

#### What is it?

Phrase searching is a powerful way to retrieve specific information containing commonly used phrases. Phrase searching tells the computer to search for two or more words in the exact order in which they are entered. Different databases and search engines treat phrase searching in different ways. There are generally two ways to conduct a phrase search using a database:

1. Use quotation marks to enclose the phrase

Example: "attention deficit disorder", "spirit of St. Louis"

2. Use a pull down menu or a check box in a database that has that option and choose the phrase search option.