
what are electronic databases?

Electronic databases contain collections of records in a machine-readable format which are then searchable by a computer. Much of the research that is done on the computer is through the use of electronic databases. There are many different electronic databases and often times, each one seems to search a little differently. Learning some general rules for searching electronic databases may help you in your next online search.

electronic searching

➤ Step 1 – Choosing a Database

Database Limitations – No ONE database covers everything!

- ◆ The database may have a specialized SUBJECT MATTER.
- ◆ Check the DATES COVERED.
- ◆ What TYPE(s) OF PUBLICATION does the database include? (e.g., newspaper, magazine, journal articles, etc...)

TIP: Select the “right” database for your research! If you are searching the wrong database, no matter what you do, you will NOT find what you are looking for!

➤ Step 2 – Composing Your Search

- ◆ Subject – Think of a sentence that expresses what you are looking for. Then, find a subject heading that matches or is close. (Often, you can use the database to find a match for your terms.)
- ◆ Keywords – Identify the most important words or concepts from your sentence. (These are your *keywords*.)
- ◆ Search Strategy – Design a search strategy out of the concepts using Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT – see below for information on Boolean operators) and other features within the capabilities of the specific database being searched. (Example: alcoholism AND accidents)

TIP: Keywords do not include words such as: a, an, the, with, for, in, on, etc...

➤ Step 3 – Searching

Which type of SEARCH should I do?

- ◆ Subject Searching – Searches for matches to subject headings (controlled vocabulary terms – assigned by the database). *Problems include: not as flexible as using keywords, current terminology may not be represented.
- ◆ Keyword Searching – Searches the database for occurrences of that word anywhere in the record. *Problems include: variant spellings (check, cheque), plurals, and false drops (or false ‘hits’).

Searching Tips

- ◆ Boolean Searching – Use of the terms AND, OR, NOT to formulate search strategies.
AND – narrows your search to match items that contain ALL the terms (e.g., fishing **AND** sport)
OR – widens your search to match items that contain ANY one or more of the terms (e.g., cat **OR** feline **OR** kitten)
NOT – excludes terms from your search (e.g., meat **NOT** poultry)

- ◆ Truncation/Wild Card Searches – Special characters that follow the word stem and allow for spelling variations, plurals, or other variants.
Most often the characters are * or ? (Check the database.)
Example: child* (child, children, childish)
 wom*n (women, woman)
 work* (work, worker, workmate, workroom)

➤ **Step 4 – Refine Your Search: Did you get too few, too many, or just the right number of results?**

Too Few

- ◆ Use different search terms
 - ☒ Synonyms
 - ☒ Alternate spellings
 - ☒ Truncation
- ◆ Widen search by using OR
- ◆ Use broader terms
- ◆ Use a keyword search

Too Many

- ◆ Narrow your search with AND
- ◆ Use more specific terms
- ◆ Limit by date, publication type, language, etc...

Just Right!

- ◆ Examine results to see what worked (terms or keywords used)

➤ **Step 5 – Evaluate Your Results**

- ◆ Review – Read through each of your results.
- ◆ Mark – Decide on the items you wish to obtain.
- ◆ Obtain Items – Print, e-mail, or download full-text results.

REMEMBER! If you don't find what you need:

- ✓ Check the spelling on your search terms.
 - ✓ Revise search strategy.
 - ✓ Try a different database
- OR
- ✓ ASK the Library staff to help you!!