

## Tips for Database Searching

### Before you get started...

Searching for articles in a library database is different than searching with Google. Here are three tips to get you started: Remember that databases are literal, meaning they will only search for the words you typed in the search (they won't correct typos or ask "Did you really mean...?").

Be persistent! Sometimes you'll come up with great results on the first try, but often it takes several modifications before you get the articles you need.

Don't be afraid to ask Library staff for help. We're available in person, by phone and via email; we're always happy to help you find the research materials you need!

### The Six Steps

Following the six steps below is a great way to approach database searching.

#### Step 1: keywords

Keywords are the basic words necessary to express an idea or topic. What are the keywords for your topic?

*example:* topic = use of service dogs with military veterans  $\Rightarrow$  keywords = service dogs, veterans

#### Step 2: alternative wording (OR)

There is often more than one way of saying the same thing. Are there alternate words for your keywords/ideas?

- Link together your alternatives together with the word **OR**

*examples:* service dogs **OR** service animals ▪ veteran **OR** veterans **OR** soldier **OR** soldiers

#### Step 3: add ( ), \*, " " as needed

( ) Use parentheses to create groups of words linked together with OR

\* Use an asterisk (sometimes called a "wildcard") to search a word that can end multiple ways

" " Use quotation marks to search for a phrase (the words must appear in the article exactly as they appear in quotes)

*examples:* service dogs OR service animals  $\Rightarrow$  ("service dogs" OR "service animals")  
veteran OR veterans OR soldier OR soldiers  $\Rightarrow$  (veteran\* OR soldier\*)

#### Step 4: use AND

Many topics combine more than one idea; combine your ideas with AND.

*example:* ("service dogs" OR "service animals") **AND** (veteran\* OR soldier\*)

#### Step 5: try the search

Try typing your search (from Step 4 above) into the library catalog or into an article database.

#### Step 6: can you improve your search? (subject terms)

Look at your search results, especially at the **subject terms**. Are there any words you can add to your original search that would improve your results? Are there any other adjustments you can make, such as adding quotes? Take words out or add words in?

*example:* Looking at the results, there are some interesting subject terms that could possibly be added to the search:  
animals as aids for people with disabilities ▪ working dogs ▪ guide dogs ▪ military

*possible revised search:*

("service dogs" **OR** "working dogs" **OR** "guide dogs") **AND** (veteran\* OR soldier\* **OR** "military personnel")

Many articles seem to focus on using service dogs to help with PTSD and other mental health issues. If you decide to re-focus your research on that specifically, add subject terms for this aspect of the topic:

post-traumatic stress disorder ▪ anxiety ▪ mental health services

*possible revised search:*

"service dogs" **AND** (veteran\* OR soldier\* OR "military personnel") **AND** "post-traumatic stress disorder"

## Choosing a Database

Choosing the right database is important to getting good results. Each database covers some topics better than others.

### General databases (cover a wide variety of topics)

Always consider using one or both of these in any search:

- *Academic Search Complete* (has more academic research/scholarly/peer reviewed articles than *MasterFILE*)
- *MasterFILE Premier* (has more articles written for a general audience than *Academic Search*)

### Subject Databases (databases that focus on specific topics)

- *America: History & Life*
- *Biography in Context*
- *Business Source Elite*
- *Regional Business News*
- *ERIC* (education & teaching)
- *Professional Development Collection* (teaching)
- *MAS Ultra* (ECE: articles written for high school age kids)
- *Primary Search* (ECE: articles for elementary age kids)
- *Military & Government Collection*
- *Newspaper Source Plus*
- *Opposing Viewpoints* (controversial topics)
- *Psychology & Behavioral Sciences Collection*
- *Religion & Philosophy Collection*
- Databases for Nursing & Health Professionals
- *CINAHL Plus*
- *Health Source (Nursing Edition)*
- *MEDLINE*
- Databases of Health Information (for consumers)
- *AltHealth Watch*
- *Consumer Health Complete*
- *Health Source (Consumer Edition)*

## Tips for Times When You Don't Get Useful / Any Results

### Too Few Results: *things to think about*

- Did you make a typo?
- Should you remove any of your keywords? (i.e. Did you require that the database find too many words?)
- Can you add more alternate using OR? By using OR you are broadening your search by giving the database more options; if database has more options, it may be able to find an article containing your search words.
- If you used a phrase in quotes: would your search results be better if you *didn't* use the quotes?
- If you are able to find at least one or two good articles, look at the subject headings and see if there are any words or phrases that you can use to modify your search.
- Consider searching a different database: maybe your topic isn't covered very well by the one you are currently searching.

### Too Many Results: *things to think about*

- Look at the subject headings used to describe articles on your topic—are there any you can add to your search?
- Is there an aspect of your topic that you can add to the search to narrow the results?
- Look at the articles in the search results that are *not* about your topic. Are there any words from your search that seem to be bringing back these false hits? Can you change your search words to different ones?
- Look at the various ways to limit your results by date of publication, and so on. Would any of them help?
- If you are using “official” subject terms in your search, try going to the Advanced Search screen. Type any subject terms in their own box and set “Select a Field” to SU (the database will now only bring back articles that use those words in the Subject Terms).

### Results Not Relevant to Your Topic: *things to think about*

- If the results are on a different topic, think of ways to distinguish your topic from the wrong ones, by perhaps adding more keywords or using a phrase in quotes.
- If you are able to find at least one or two good articles, look at the subject headings and see if there are any words or phrases that you can use to modify your search.
- If you are using “official” subject terms in your search, try going to the Advanced Search screen. Type any subject terms in their own box and set “Select a Field” to SU (the database will now only bring back articles that use those words in the Subject Terms).
- Consider searching a different database: maybe your topic isn't covered very well by the one you are currently searching.