

Search Technique

So once you've learned the basics of using a database like EBSCOhost, you can move on to more precise searching. Again, remember that using a database is very different from using an Internet search engine like Google. With Google or Yahoo, anything goes when you are searching. Databases really expect you to have some search technique.

There are three search techniques that I will talk about today. The first is using Boolean operators or connecting words. You've already had a little exposure to this in the module on the basics of using a database. I'll also talk about using the advanced search feature and the benefits that can bring. Finally I will talk about what we call "known item searching" which is where you know exactly what you are looking for. For example if you say that you need an article from the Dec. 20, 2008 issue of The Economist, I'll show you how to find that.

Using Boolean operators or connecting words are the most powerful way to create a precise search in a database. There are three Boolean operators: AND, OR, NOT. They do different functions in a search, just like in math you have plus signs and multiplication signs that do different functions. Let's look at the Boolean operator handout that we have for more information.

On the LMC website under Research Help there is a Boolean Connector handout. Let's take a look at that.

The first Boolean operator is OR. Use OR when you want to use synonyms and expand your search. The example given here is stress OR anxiety, which are very closely related. If you did this search, the database would find articles that contained "stress" or contained "anxiety." Some articles might contain both words, but the OR search looks for one or the other. Continuing the example of insomnia from the previous section, you could search for insomnia OR sleep deprivation. These two things mean about the same thing, and you will likely find more articles if you look for more variations of your topic.

AND is a way to narrow your search and make it more precise. I used this in the section on database basics and it's what I use most frequently when searching. It's a way to specify that you want several components in your search. In the example given here, stress AND anxiety, this will only find articles that mention both of these words. That's going to be a smaller number, since you are requiring two elements.

In the example using insomnia, if you just searched for insomnia you would find lots of articles. Insomnia AND treatment would find fewer, since you'll be looking at a specific aspect of insomnia. Insomnia AND treatment AND students would find even fewer articles, since there are three required elements. Using AND is a quick and easy way to find specific results.

NOT is the last operator, and I rarely use NOT. If you search for stress NOT anxiety, the database will look for all articles with the word stress. Then from that group of articles,

the database will omit any articles that contain the word anxiety. This is a way of narrowing down by excluding items. I find that this type of searching will often exclude really useful items if you're not careful. The only time I use NOT is if a word has several meanings. Apple is a good example. Apple is a type of fruit, but it's also the name of a computer company. If I'm looking for information on apple (the fruit), I could search for apple NOT computer and this will exclude most of the articles that talk about the Apple computer company.

Let's go to EBSCOhost and use these. I'm going to continue to use Academic Search Complete and I'm going to limit to full-text articles.

I'll start with the AND search. Insomnia AND treatment AND students Now, you may want more articles than this, and we'd already talked about using sleep deprivation as another way to describe insomnia. You can use AND and OR together in a search, but there's a trick. Start with your same search, but we need to add the OR part. Your search will be something like this: insomnia OR sleep deprivation AND treatment AND students If I search like this I'll get some odd results since the database won't exactly know how to handle the AND and the OR. You need to use parenthesis to clarify what you want: (insomnia OR sleep deprivation) AND treatment AND students So this will find either insomnia or sleep deprivation, but only in articles that discuss treatment and students. You'll see that we've found a couple more articles. Sometimes adding one work with an OR connector can really improve your results and sometimes the changes are subtle.

Let's move on to using Advanced Search. This isn't that much different than the basic search, but it takes more of a "fill in the blank" approach. I'll use the same search. Type the OR statement in the top box and then treatment and students in the boxes below. The little drop down boxes read AND, but you can see that you can change those if you need to. If I run the search like this, I'll get exactly the same results as the basic search.

Another difference in advanced search is that you can tell the database where to look for the words you are searching for. So far the database has been looking for your search words anywhere. You could tell the database that you want to find articles with "treatment" in the title of the article. Or maybe you want to find articles with "sleep deprivation" as the subject. Subjects can be a great way to search since if the article has "sleep deprivation" assigned as a subject, then a significant portion of the article is about the topic. You know that it will be more significant than a casual mention.

Changing where the database looks for information will vastly narrow your results, so be aware of that. I'm going to slightly change the search we have been working with. I'm going to look for "sleep deprivation" as a subject and then look for treatment and students mentioned anywhere in the article. You'll see I only found four articles, but these articles are likely to be very relevant to your topic.

Let's move on to what we call "known item searching." Say you are looking for an article about insomnia that was in the Oct. 18, 2008 edition of The Economist magazine. There

are a couple ways that you can find this article. You can find information on the publication and then go from there, or you can use advanced search.

To find information on the publication, click on the “publications” button at the very top of the screen. Type the magazine name in the lower search box. It finds the information on the Economist. I know that the article was published in the October 18, 2008 issue, so using the menu on the right side click on 2008 and then you’ll find the October 18th issue. This shows you all the articles in that issue of the magazine. You can browse through and find the article on insomnia, which will take a little while. (It’s article 68 if you look through all of them, I’m not going to.) Or go up to the search and type “AND insomnia” to the search. This search limits to just this issue. There you go: the one article on insomnia in this issue.

The other way to find a specific article that you know when and/or where it was published is through advanced search. In advanced search type insomnia in the first box and then Economist in the second box. Change the drop down box to read “SO Journal Name” (SO means source, don’t worry about that too much.) Click search and it will find all articles in the Economist that talk about insomnia. Luckily we found just one, and it’s the one we need. This way of searching isn’t quite as specific, but usually you can find what you need without too much extra work!

Hopefully you can see how useful these techniques can be when searching. As always, if you have any questions about searching, please feel free to contact the library. Our email address and phone number can be found at the beginning of this tutorial.