Database Search Strategies

Plan Your Search  Many searches begin by doing a keyword search.

Think of words associated with your topic.

For example, if your topic is the use of performance enhancing drugs in sports, you might formulate a keyword search using some words such as sports, drugs, steroids, athletes, health, and performance.

Also think of phrases or pairs of phrases that might help focus your search:

For example: “Performance enhancing drugs” and “health risks”
Or: “physical fitness” and “anabolic steroids”

Putting Your Search into a Language the Database Understands

1. Make sure your keywords are spelled correctly

Typed in your keywords and still not getting any search results? Double-check your spelling. It sounds obvious, but it happens all the time. If you misspell a keyword, you will not get results.

2. “gun control”

Try USING QUOTATION MARKS for PHRASES: Searches in some databases are aided by the use of quotation marks around phrases. For example, if you search for “gun control” you will return results which include mention of the exact phrase “gun control” in the article somewhere. Quotations around phrases will not work with if phrases contain with stop words, though (the, at, and, was, etc), in that case the database will revert to a basic search again.

3. cost AND “health care debate”

Try USING THE "AND" OPERATOR: You can attach several terms together using "AND", like in the above example. (In many databases, putting the different terms into different search boxes usually also functions as 'AND” operator) By adding key terms or phrases together this way, you can further refine your search and reduce the number of unwanted results.

4. work*

Try USING TRUNCATION to expand results: Sometimes using * after part of a word or instead of a plural ending can help provide more results relevant to your topic. Truncation is represented by an asterisk (*). To use truncation, enter the root of a search term and replace the ending with an asterisk. By placing an asterisk at the end of a root word, such as work* you will retrieve all words beginning with that root (work, worker, workforce, workplace, etc.)