Effective searching techniques

Find out how to construct effective search terms and improve your search results

LSE Library

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How do I construct effective searches?

Our recommended 4 stage process

Stage 1: Analyse Your Research Topic.

- Be clear about the type of information that you want. Identify any dates, key persons, geographical locations or concepts which relate to your needs.
- Break down your research query into a series of relevant words or phrases that you can search for.

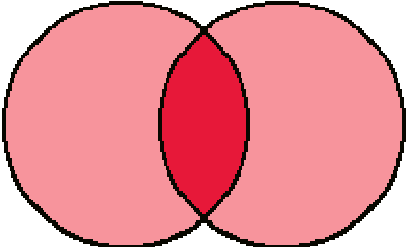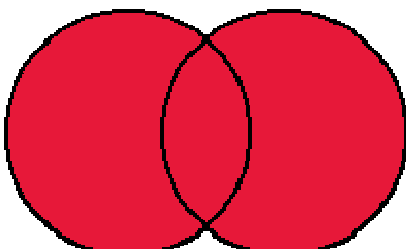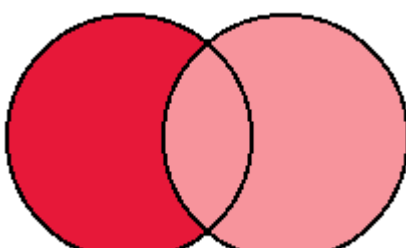**Stage 2: Select Your Search Terms**

- It is necessary to choose your search terms correctly. Remember that search tools are machines they will look for whatever you type in, they cannot currently interpret it. Ideally your number of search terms should not exceed 6 to 8 keywords or phrases.

Some good tips are:

- Check your spelling
- Identify any terms which have alternative spellings (e.g. labor and labour)
- Identify any synonyms (e.g. women or female)
- Identify any search terms that may have alternative word endings (e.g. Marx and Marxism)
- Identify key concepts, writers or research institutions associated with your topic
- Consider the level of specificity. This is one of the most difficult things to get right. Make your search terms too broad and you will get too many hits. Make them too specific and you will get too few. Be prepared to refine your search after reviewing your initial results.
- Avoid using prepositions, conjunctions or common verbs as search terms. These include: and, about, if, the, of, a, not, why, before, is, at. Search Engines refer to them as stopwords and usually ignore them.

Stage 3: Combine Your Search Terms

Most searches require more than one keyword. Therefore you will need to combine terms. Check the help screens of any search tools you use for advice on this.
Generally it is better to start with a broad search then gradually refine your results.

Combine terms using	Effect	Potential uses
and	Requires all the search terms to appear somewhere in the document. Not necessarily in the same order. For instance a search for *Blair and labour party* will retrieve all those documents, which contain both terms. Any that contain just one of them will not be retrieved. This is represented in the diagram on the left by the dark red colour.	Useful for narrowing a search by making it more specific. The more *and*s you add the fewer hits you should get.
Or	Requires any of the search terms to be found somewhere in the document. For instance the search for *Blair or labour party* will retrieve any documents, which contain either of the terms or both of them. This is represented in the diagram on the left by the dark red colour.	Useful for broadening a search, searching for synonyms and alternative word endings.
and not	This excludes any documents containing the word following *and not* in your search term. For example if you entered *Labour Party and not Australia* you would retrieve all those documents containing Labour Party but those also containing the word Australia would be	Useful for narrowing a search especially where a word has several different meanings but should be used with caution, as it is easy to exclude relevant results

	excluded. This is represented in the diagram on the left by the dark red colour. .	

Stage 4
Run your search and look at the results. See if they match what you tended to get.
If you have too many results try to think of ways to narrow down your search.

Narrowing your search- quick tips
- Is there an advanced search screen where you can limit by year of publication?
- Can you limit your results to a particular type of resource? Many databases include references to book reviews. You can narrow your search by excluding these.
- Does the database have a results screen or results manager where you can combine searches to make them more specific?
- Another good tip is to try to limit subject terms to specific geographical areas e.g replace civil liberties with civil liberties in Sweden

If you have too few results try to broaden your search to make it more general.

Broadening your search- quick tips

- Try to think of any alternative spellings. Eg color and colour
- Try truncating terms to see if any items are indexed under alternative word endings. In order to do this you must check the help screen of the database to see what format this requires. eg if searching for Marx try marx* to retrieve associated materials on Marxism.
- Try to think of broader terms eg replace blair with Labour Party.

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