

Searching Databases

Unlike public search engines such as Google, library databases usually find only exactly what you ask for. Therefore, you need to use some specific search techniques, which are generally available in most databases.

Using Keywords and Boolean Operators

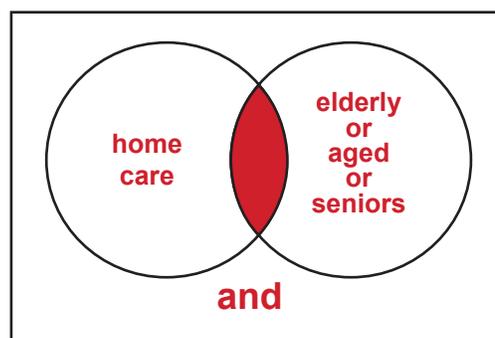
You will need to convert your research question into keywords. You may need to think of alternate words, or synonyms. It may be necessary to combine keywords with either an **and** or an **or** Boolean operator. Use *and* when you want each concept to be present in the documents you wish to retrieve. Use *or* when you want either concept to be present, or when using synonyms. If more than one operator is used, brackets should be used to “nest” terms, or group them together. For example, a keyword search using the concepts of *home care* and *elderly* could look like this:

home care and (elderly or aged or seniors)

This will find publications dealing with home care of the elderly, even if the document uses the word *aged* or *seniors* instead of *elderly*. In the diagram on the right, each circle represents a concept, and the area where the circles overlap represents the search results, or “hits.” Many databases also allow use of the **not** operator, which will exclude concepts, as in this example:

home care not plumbing

Some databases use the plus sign **+** instead of the word *and*, or in order to force an exact word search, as well as the minus sign **-** instead of *not* to exclude terms.



Subject Headings/Descriptors

In addition to searching by keywords, you should consider using each database’s preferred subject terms, sometimes called *subject headings* or *descriptors*. For example, the sociology indexing database, Sociological Abstracts, prefers the term *elderly*, while the library catalogues prefer *aged* or *older people*. Using the proper subject terms will help to ensure you get all the relevant publications in the database, and will also prevent you from getting irrelevant hits. Some databases have an online thesaurus which contains the subject terms, while others allow you to browse and select subject terms.

*Truncation **

Truncation is the process of abbreviating or shortening a keyword to its stem in order to retrieve all possible word variations. Most databases will let you find variations of a word using a wildcard symbol, usually an asterisk (although the Quest catalogue requires the \$ symbol). For example, typing *gerontolog** would retrieve *gerontology*, *gerontological*, etc. But be careful not to truncate a word too far. Typing *ger** would also get you information on geraniums, germs, and Germans.

Exact Phrase Searching “ ”

It has been assumed in the above examples that a database will search *home care* as a phrase, and not as two separate keywords. However, some databases (e.g., those provided by EBSCO) would automatically put an invisible *and* between the words, and require double quotation marks around phrases (e.g., “*home care*”).

Field Searching/Limiting

Field searching is used to specify the type of keyword you are entering. For example, a person may be searched as a subject, rather than as an author, by clicking or selecting “subject.”