Useful Search Techniques for Literature in Databases
Truncation, Boolean Operators, and Complex Searches

Truncation
Databases tend to be literal in interpreting your queries. For example, they won’t generally return plurals of words if you just type in the singular form. If a term you are searching has variants with the same beginning but various endings, you can use truncation to capture all these. For example:

anxi* = anxiety, anxieties, anxious, etc...

Use the asterisk (*) to replace the last few letters of the word. The asterisk means “any character(s) (or none) can be here.” Be careful where you truncate! In the above example, truncating back to, ant* would give you too many results (e.g., ants, anxiolytic, anterograde, etc), while anxiet* would eliminate some of the relevant variants.

So, do not try to truncate short words like “cat” or rat. You’ll bring back too much irrelevant stuff, like “catastrophe”! Instead search on the particular variants you need, e.g. cat OR cats. Also note that you cannot truncate backwards – anxieties* isn’t useful because no other words begin with anxieties. (Note that some databases may use different symbols for truncation.)

Boolean Operators
In searching, Boolean logic refers to using AND, OR, and NOT (called operators) to combine keywords. You can narrow using (AND), broaden using (OR), or filter using (NOT). Using these operators correctly will help you access relevant results more quickly and with greater ease.

AND narrows results, because all keywords you combine with AND must be present in a record for it to be retrieved. If a search gets too many results, try “ANDing” the search together with terms about other aspects of your topic.

Example: psychopathy AND morality
**OR expands** results, because any of the keywords you combine with OR can be present in a record for it to be retrieved. OR can be used to search synonyms and conceptually similar terms.

Example: universities OR colleges, or in this case, universit* OR college

**NOT filters out** records you don’t want from the retrieval. Use NOT after you run a search and find that most of the records deal with another topic than you had in mind. NOT out a word that is found in those irrelevant records but not in the records you do want. Note that unlike AND and OR, NOT is not commutative – that is, Saturn NOT car will return a different result than car NOT Saturn.

Example: Saturn NOT car

**Parentheses**

Boolean operators can be used with parentheses to build complex searches that better capture what you are looking for. When the search tool interprets a query, just as in algebra, the terms inside the parentheses are processed first. Usually, you’ll put sets of synonyms connected by OR inside parentheses, then AND together those sets of synonyms with other concepts.

*Example*: (depress* OR sad) AND (nerv* OR neuro*)