



Search Strategy Checklist

Too Much Information

Try looking at an irrelevant record your search retrieved. Can you figure out why the database gave it to you? Did you use one word that the computer misunderstood? See if you can use a more specific term or maybe a short phrase that excludes the meaning you don't want. Try adding a new term that makes your old term more specific.

Ex: Instead of: Japan and economy, try: Japan and economy and (auto or automobile or car)

Check where in the record your search terms matched. The best matches for topics are in fields like Subject or Title. Look for an Advanced or Expert Search option in the database to search in specific fields only, if you can.

Use limiters when they're available. Will the database let you ask for publications only in English? Can you ask for only journal articles? Want more recent information? Is there a subject heading that covers your topic? Can you get rid of book and film reviews? Play around with your options and see if they help.

Try using the NOT operator. You should only use it when you are sure that there is NO article with that term that you might want. Some databases use NOT alone, others use AND NOT. Some Web search engines use a minus sign (-). Look for the database HELP section.

Too Little Information

Did you spell your search terms correctly? Research databases are remarkable tools, but they don't come equipped with spell checkers. One misspelled word can sink an entire search query. Check a dictionary.

Get rid of long phrases. When you type in a phrase, all the words must appear in exactly that order before the database will give you anything. Some databases automatically put the operator AND between the words you type, turning your phrase into a long Boolean search string.

Try to come up with broader terms for the idea you need. Every so often, it happens that there's very little written on a specific topic, but a lot on the general area.

Very narrow: recombinant DNA and
Narrow: cloning and animals
Broader: genetic engineering and animal*
Very broad: genetic* and animal*

Try using alternative terms. That's what you gathered all the extra vocabulary for. Don't forget truncation

Wrong Kind of Information

Check the coverage of the databases you're using. Do they cover the kinds of material you need? The right discipline(s)? The right kinds of documents? The right dates?