CREATING ACCURATE SEARCH STATEMENTS

Searching electronic resources is easier if a researcher knows what techniques will create more results when the initial search proves too narrow or fewer results when it is too broad. For example, a researcher looking for information about French social thought will find few results with a search statement such as french social thought because it would require exactly these words in this order to be present in the results. Search for keywords, not phrases, and think of related terms: (french or france) and social and (thought or philosophy or idea*). The techniques, including the Boolean operators (AND, OR, and NOT), used to create this statement are explained below. Note that no electronic resource requires capitalization.

COMBINING OR EXCLUDING TERMS

AND specifies that all terms must be present in the record (the information retrieved):

women and homelessness
world war ii and japan and causes

AND narrows a search since the more terms you join with AND the fewer results you will receive.

OR specifies that either term may appear in the record. It is often used with synonyms:

oil or petroleum

OR expands a search because the more terms you join with OR the more results you will receive.

NOT specifies that the first term but not the second must appear in the record:

depression not economic*
depression not psycholog*

TRUNCATION

Truncation is used to indicate that any form of a root word is to be retrieved. The asterisk (*) is the most common truncation symbol for databases, but some resources, such as JSTOR, use +. Check a database’s help screens to determine what, if any, truncation is allowed. Truncation is especially helpful to indicate that no distinction is being made between the singular and plural forms of a word:

college* or universit*
disease* or illness* or ailment*
Do not truncate a too common root, such as cat*, coll*, comp*, etc., or you will retrieve hundreds or thousands of unrelated terms.

NESTING

Nesting must be used in most databases when a search statement involves OR and another operator. The OR part of the statement must be enclosed in parentheses:

homeless and (shelter* or hous*)

In the above search, homeless is matched with shelter or shelters and then with all words beginning with hous, and the two sets of results are combined.

ADVANCED SEARCHING

More sophisticated search statements may be needed when the information being sought involves several synonyms. For example, a search in SocIndex or Sociological Abstracts for articles dealing with women drug offenders might resemble the following:

(women or female*) and (drug* or narcotic*)
and (offender* or user* or addict*)

A search for articles dealing with heterosexual attitudes toward homosexuality might look something like the following:

heterosexual* and attitude* and (homosexual* or lesbian* or gay* or bisexual* or sexual preference* or sex role* or sexual orientation* or homophob*)

A search in EconLit for articles dealing with economic aspects of the major American professional team sports might look like the following:

(baseball or basketball or football or hockey)
not (gambling or colleg* or ncaa or olympic*)

The word economic* is unnecessary in this instance because all the citations in EconLit deal with some aspect of economics. Inexperienced searchers seeking this information would probably use sport* as one of their search terms. The problem is that most sources about the economic aspects of sports will deal with only one sport and the terms sport or sports will not appear in the record(s). Since professional is also unlikely to appear in most records, the best way to be certain that the information deals with professional sports is to exclude collegiate football, NCAA basketball, Olympic hockey, etc. Since gambling is a major component in the economic life of sports, it also must be excluded.