



Having trouble searching the databases? Try some of these tips.

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## Tip 1. Choose Your Search Terms Carefully

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Think carefully about the terms that you type into the search box. These are common mistakes:

- **Too many search terms:** If you type too many words, you may retrieve no references, or very few references. The database is trying to find references that contain **all those words**.
- **Too few search terms:** If you type too few words, you may retrieve too many references.
- **Inappropriate search terms:** If you don't type the terms that are commonly used to describe the subject you are researching, you may retrieve irrelevant references.
- **Incorrect spelling**

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## Tip 2. Find the Appropriate Database

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The UQ Library subscribes to hundreds of databases, and there are further databases that are available free on the web. Some databases cover only books, some cover only journal articles or newspaper articles, some cover only theses, and some databases cover a range of publication types.

The **Databases Gateway** on the UQ Library homepage will allow you to **select databases by subject**. You will also find a search box which will allow you to simultaneously search many different databases using **Research Pro**.

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## Tip 3. What are You Searching?

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Some databases search the **full text** of the references that they contain. Other databases only search a **brief description**, or summary, of the references.

If you are searching a **full-text database**, you will be able to search on **very specific** terms.

If you are searching a database that only has summaries (**abstracts**) of the references, you may have to use fewer terms and **less specific** terms.

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## Tip 4. Connectors: AND, OR, NOT

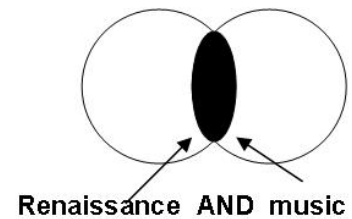
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Connectors (sometimes called **Boolean operators**) are used to combine search terms. There are three connectors: **AND**, **OR**, **NOT**. These are described below:

### **AND**

placed between words means both words must appear in each reference. This will **narrow** your search.

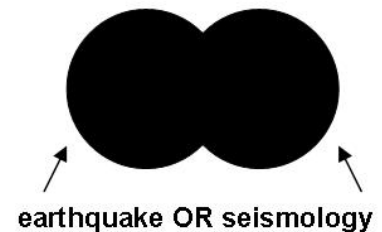
For example, *renaissance AND music* will retrieve all references which contain both terms.



### **OR**

placed between words means that either, or all, word/s may appear in each reference. This will **broaden** your search.

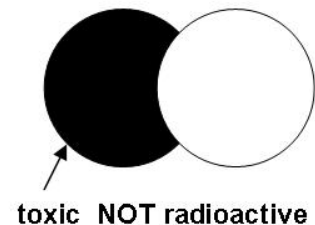
For example, *earthquake OR seismology* will retrieve all references with *earthquake* or *seismology*, as well as references with both terms.



### **NOT**

between words means that the second word must not appear in any reference. This will **narrow** your search.

For example, *toxic NOT radioactive* will retrieve all references with *toxic*, **except** references which include *radioactive*. Take care when you use the **NOT** connector – you may exclude useful references.



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## Tip 5. Truncation (Wildcards)

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- Truncate words to retrieve all the alternative terms. For example, *comput\** will retrieve *computer*, *computers*, *compute*, *computation*.
- Some databases also provide internal truncation to facilitate searching on alternative spellings. For example, *p?ediatric* will retrieve *paediatric* and *pediatric*.

Truncation symbols (also called *wildcards*) vary from database to database. Some databases will automatically include plurals or variant spellings in the search. Familiarise yourself with each database's requirements by consulting the **Help** screens or **Searching Tips**.

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## Tip 6. Phrase searching

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- Some databases will assume that a string of words should be searched for as a **phrase**. In other words, it will only retrieve references in which the words occur **side by side** or in very close proximity. This works well if you have typed *information technology*, but it will be a problem if you have typed *depression teenagers* (instead of *depression in teenagers*).

- If you are searching a database that does **not** automatically search the terms as a phrase, you may find it useful to **force** the database to search them as a phrase. Often you can do this by enclosing the terms in **double quotation marks**, e.g. *“information technology”*.
- In some databases, there will be a **separate search box** for phrase searching.

You can find out about searching for phrases from the database's **Help** screens or **Searching Tips**.

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## Tip 7. Limiting your results

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- Many databases will give you the option to **limit** your results.
- For example, you may be able to specify that you want to retrieve only **articles with full text**, or **articles from peer-reviewed (refereed) journals**. Or you may be able to limit your results to articles published in **certain years** or in a **particular journal**.

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## Tip 8. Field searching

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- This is another way of limiting your results. The references on the database are normally split up into **fields**, such as *author*, *title*, *journal title* or *subject descriptor*.
- If the database has an advanced search option, you will probably be able to restrict your search to a **particular field**. If your search terms appear in the title or subject descriptors of the reference, the reference is likely to be more relevant.
- Field searching can also be used to distinguish between, for example, *shakespeare* as an author and *shakespeare* as a subject.

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## Tip 9. Subject Descriptors and the Thesaurus

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- Subject terms, sometimes called descriptors or keywords, are **standard terms** used to describe the content of publications. Using the subject terms can make searching easier and more reliable.
- Some databases list all these terms in a **thesaurus**. The thesaurus may have an elaborate structure of broader, narrower and related terms, which will help you to search very precisely.
- The thesaurus may allow you to **explode** a term. This means that you are searching on your selected term and also on all narrower terms which have been linked to that term in the thesaurus.

You can find out if the database provides a thesaurus by checking the **Help** screens or **Searching Tips**.

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## Tip 10. Snowballing

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- Once you have identified even one useful reference, this may help you locate **similar references** on the database.
- Check the database record. Are there **subject descriptors** in the record? Can you click on the descriptors, or select them, to search for **other references which have the same descriptors**? Or can you redo the search, using those descriptors?
- When you locate the full text of a useful reference, remember to check its **list of references or bibliography**. This may point you to other useful references.
- Some databases support **cited-reference searching**. This is a technique that allows you to start with one important reference and then find later references that cite it.

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## Tip 11. Parentheses

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- If you use more than one type of connector in a search statement, e.g. AND as well as OR, you need to use parentheses to keep the groups of terms together. This procedure is sometimes called **nesting**. For example:

*(women OR woman OR female) AND (smoking OR tobacco)*

This is a technique for power searchers. The less sophisticated alternative is to do several searches with different combinations of the search terms.

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## Tip 12. Proximity Searching (finding words within a specified distance of each other)

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- Some databases allow you to search for words **within a specified distance of one another**. This is particularly important when searching large full-text databases. If one of your search terms appears on page 3 of an article, and the other search term appears on page 7, the article is probably not very relevant.
- Proximity searches limit the number of words between your search terms. For example:
  - **(television) within 5 (violence)** retrieves references that contain *television* and *violence* in any order, but not more than five words apart.
  - **(television) near (violence)** retrieves references that contain television and violence in any order, but within a certain proximity, which is defined by the database (perhaps in the same sentence, or in the same paragraph).

The way that you perform a proximity search (the search **syntax**) will vary from database to database. Check the database's **Help** screens or **Searching Tips** to find out if the database allows proximity searching and, if so, how you should construct your search statement.