

## Tips and search techniques

There are a variety of search techniques which can enhance the number and relevance of results that a search tool retrieves. All search tools may not support the techniques listed below, and advice on which techniques can be used may be available from help areas.

- **Keywords** Think around the topic as much as possible. For example, if using the term "elderly" brings up no results you could try "aged". Some search tools provide a thesaurus of keywords. Use this tool if possible, as it provides consistency.
- **Spelling and alternative terms** Be aware of: synonymous terms (e.g. cancer and neoplasm) singular v. plural terms alternative spellings (e.g. paediatric and pediatric) acronyms (e.g. CJD and Creutzfeld-Jacob disease).
- **Boolean Searching** Boolean operators allow you join terms together, widen a search or exclude terms from your search results. They allow you to be more precise in locating your information. Not all search tools support Boolean searching. **AND** - Narrows your search by combining words. The web pages found must contain all the words which you have joined by using AND. **OR** - Broadens your search to include resources which contain any or all of the terms connected by OR. **NOT** or **AND NOT** - Narrows your search by excluding a term.
- **+ and - searching** This is a simplified version of Boolean searching. Not all search engines support this type of searching, but it does allow more specific results to be located. + sign - Attaching a + to a word means that the web sites found must contain that word. - sign - Attaching a - to a word means that the search engine will exclude web sites that contain that word
- **Phrase Searching** Phrase searching is a technique that narrows your search down by searching for an exact phrase or sentence. It is particularly useful when searching for a title or a quotation. Usually speech marks are used to connect the words together. For example "Towards a healthier Scotland" will find web pages which contain that phrase. Some search tools may use brackets or single quote marks rather than speech marks.
- **Truncation/Wild cards** This helps you to retrieve information on similar words that have letters in common. It involves using a symbol to replace letters. For example physiotherap\* will retrieve physiotherapy, physiotherapeutic, physiotherapists and so on. Whereas wom\*n will retrieve women and women. The symbol used varies but is regularly a \* or \$ or ?.
- **Limiting your search** Decide at the start of your search what your limits are i.e. what information will be excluded. For example, you could decide that anything of an American origin would not be relevant or that you could just be looking for information from government sources. This will help you narrow down your results.
- **Advanced search options** Finally, remember to check the advanced search options offered by the search tool you are using. Many offer ways to get more specific results that have not yet been mentioned. For example, Google allows you to search for files in a specific format e.g. word documents or pdf files while Altavista allows you to narrow down your search by date.

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