

Mina Rees Library

library.gc.cuny.edu

CREATING ACCURATE SEARCH STATEMENTS

This guide is also available at library.gc.cuny.edu/research/boolean.asp.

Searching CUNY+, the bibliographic and full-text databases to which the Mina Rees Library subscribes, and Web search engines 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 would 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.

TRUNCATION

Truncation is used to indicate that any form of a root word is to be retrieved. Use a question mark (?) or an asterisk (*) in CUNY+. The asterisk is the most common truncation symbol for databases, but some resources use +. When using a database or search engine, check its *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.

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

*depression not economic**
*depression not psycholog**

NOT may not be a valid operator in all databases. **AND NOT** is occasionally required.

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 *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 in *Sociological Abstracts* 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 homophobic*)*

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 insure 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.

REFINING SEARCH STATEMENTS

A researcher looking for a specific journal article could use a database's advanced search technique, if available. For example, to find an article (or articles) comparing the works of James Baldwin and Henry James in *Modern Fiction Studies*, the searcher performing an advanced search in Humanities Abstracts would enter *james baldwin* and *henry james* in the first two search boxes, select *Subject(s)* from the adjacent drop-down menu, enter *modern fiction studies* in the third search box, and select *Journal Name* from the drop-down menu. The researcher could also enter *james baldwin and henry james and modern fiction studies* in the basic search box, but the database would take longer to process this search statement.

THESAURI

A thesaurus may be used to derive more accurate search terms in such databases as *ERIC*, *LLBA*, *MLA*, *PAIS*, *PsycInfo*, and *Sociological Abstracts*. Whenever a

database includes a thesaurus, use it to learn how controlled vocabularies result in more exact searches.

BOOLEAN GUIDES

A more detailed guide to Boolean searching is available at library.albany.edu/internet/boolean.html.

LIBRARY GUIDES

“Finding Book Reviews,” guides to other databases, and more may be found at library.gc.cuny.edu/guides/guides.asp.

**A CUNY Graduate Center Mina Rees Library Guide
Revised February 6, 2006**