Advanced Search Strategies: Limiters & Subject Searching

English Transcript

In parts one and two of the Building Search Strings tutorials, you learned how to use the Boolean operators AND, OR, and NOT, and how to use phrase searching, nesting, truncation, and wildcards. In this tutorial, you'll continue to learn strategies that help you refine and limit your search results in both library databases and internet search engines. This will give you even more control over your results.

Advanced search screens are available in almost all library databases and internet search engines. Sometimes you may need to poke around to find a search engine's advanced search screen. If you can't find it, you can Google it. Advanced search screens often begin with an area to do a Boolean search, like in this example from a library database. However, search engines may use different descriptions for the commands AND, OR, NOT, as in this example from Google.

The advanced search screen may also allow you to use phrase searching. However, advanced searching goes beyond Boolean and phrase searching, allowing you to narrow your results to exactly what you're looking for. When you select limiters, you get fewer search results that are more relevant. Some of the limiters that are available include the language that the articles are written in, the articles' reading level, the date the articles were created, the type of publication like newspaper or journal, the option for only full-text articles, and more.

Let's explore several types of limiters that you may want to use. Our first limiter, which applies to searching on the internet, enables you to limit search results to websites with a specific domain. This can somewhat control who provides the information. The most common domains are .biz, .com, .edu, .gov, .mil, .net, and .org.

For example, you might limit by .org to find out what organizations are doing to help the homeless. Or, if you feel that statistics on commercial sites ending in .com are biased, you may want to search .gov government sites first.

A different option is to limit by URL, allowing you to more easily find the information you need from a specific website. For example, let's say you're looking for NASA's information about the Hubble telescope. Using the URL limiter in combination with the phrase "hubble telescope" will allow you to find it more easily.

Sometimes you may want to limit your searches by date when you need the most current information available. With an advanced search, you can limit your results about cancer treatments to those developed in the past year, or get an update about a big storm that occurred in the past day or two.

On the other hand, sometimes you need a historical perspective to find out what people thought about a topic when it happened or was first discovered. This is especially useful in newspaper databases where articles can be found from the past. Using the Advanced Search page, you could limit articles that you found about 1989's fall of the Berlin Wall to ones published near the time of the event. Keep in mind, some databases may not contain historical articles and will yield no results when limiting by an older year. If you have questions about what a certain library database covers, ask your librarian.

Our next limiter is document type, which is usually an option within a library database. Suppose you're given a research topic, and you know very little about it. In an advanced search, you can often limit your results by the document type sometimes called topic overview. This allows you to find articles that give a broad explanation of the subject.

Or what if your assignment calls for presenting both sides of an issue? Limiting your results to the document type called viewpoint essay, or something similar, is an easy way to find opinions. You can even use the document type called cartoon to find cartoons that make a statement about an issue. Take time to explore the options. You may be surprised at what you find.

When using a library database, notice that it may provide a sidebar allowing you to further limit your search results. Some common limiters are full-text articles, publication date, subject, document type, and publication title. Let's say that you're a fan of the magazine called The Economist. Going back to our Berlin Wall example, you can limit your search results about the Berlin Wall to just articles published in The Economist. Different databases offer different post-search limiters. We encourage you to explore the options.

Notice that subject was one of the limiters available to narrow your search results. That leads us to our last advanced search technique-- subject searching.

Before explaining that, we first need to review what keyword searching is. Search engines rely on keyword searching, and most library databases initially rely on it, too. Recall that when you build a search string, you choose search terms that you think describe your topic. These search terms are called keywords. When you search by keywords, a library database analyzes the title and the first several paragraphs of all articles looking to match your specific search terms. Keyword searching usually produces many results, but not all articles will be relevant or helpful.

To get results that are more relevant, you can search by subject. Before adding an article to a database, an editor or indexer assigns very specific terms, called subject headings, to describe what the article is about. When you do a subject search in a library database, you choose terms from a list of subject headings, and the database will match articles that have those same subject headings. Therefore, your list of search results is usually shorter and more relevant. Most library databases and online catalogs are set up to use keyword searching, so you may need to explore to find the subject searching option.

OK. So how do you know what subject headings to try? Occasionally, the database or catalog you're using will link to their list of subject headings. An easier way to find official subject terms is to do a keyword search, browse your search results, and check any sidebars for a list of subject headings. You may find the exact one you need. Or, you can browse your search results and find one or two excellent articles. Then look at the subject headings that were assigned to those articles, and do a new search using those headings. Sometimes you can simply click on the subject heading to get to more relevant results.

For example, a keyword search for "Rosa Parks" leads to an article with these related subjects-- African American women; Civil rights activists; Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955; Parks, Rosa; and Race discrimination. Clicking on Montgomery Bus Boycott, 1955 will zero in on results about that historic event, which was initiated by Rosa Parks' actions.

Most library databases and internet search engines have help sections that explain how best to use limiters. Sometimes they offer video tutorials, too.

In this video, we explored how you can limit by domain type, date, document type, sidebar options, and subject headings. Whether you use a library database or an internet search engine, these are just some of the limiters you can use in an advanced search to refine your results. Limiters give you even more control when searching and help you find just what you need.

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