**RESEARCH HACKS: DATABASES AND WEB SEARCHES**

**1. DATABASE SELECTION**

Broadly speaking you can search three distinct places: library catalogs (for books), databases (for articles) and the freely available Internet (for rare needles in the haystack).

**Books**, searchable via library catalogs, are great sources of both general and highly specific information. **Databases** provide access to high quality, up-to-date information from respected publishers and publications. They provide sophisticated search capabilities and access in many instances to online full-text articles. Gear the databases you search to your topic. Be very careful using the freely available **web**. You risk finding too much “junk,” with web pages that contain potentially biased information from unreliable and unverifiable sources. For finding accurate, useful information quickly, the web is generally no match for database and catalog searching.

***Humanities-Based Databases Accessible for CPS Students***

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Database** | **Website** | **Username** | **Password** |
| **Gale** 🡪 Student Resources in Context 🡪 Literature and the Arts | www.infotrac.galegroup.com |  |  |
| **Google Scholar** | www.scholar.google.com |  |  |
| **JSTOR** | www.jstor.org/logon |  |  |

**\*BEST TIP\***: If you know someone currently in college, BEG THEM for their username and password to get onto their college’s database system. Universities have much more extensive access to databases. One of my personal favorites is **EBSCO**, also called **Academic Search Premier**, which has basically every electronic document you would ever need.

**2. SEARCH TERMS: Identify Key Concepts**

Identify key concepts and terms related to your topic area with a list. There may be just one concept or, much more likely, several concepts that will need to be considered. **Keeping a physical list** of these terms will help you when you return to a database.

Within each concept, you will need to determine appropriate words or phrases, including synonyms, broader terms, related terms and narrower terms.  Revise this list during the actual search process by noting and using subject headings that have been assigned to relevant books and articles.

**3. START THE SEARCH:  Start with a general search**

You are much better off starting with a general search and then refining your search from there. If you start with a complicated search, you will probably retrieve a very small number of articles.

For example, start with a simple search of your selected book title and analyze the results. Ask yourself the following questions:

* How much information is available on my topic?
* Where will I need to narrow my topic?
* What are more specific terms that I could be using to get the kind of articles I want?

\*\* If you are **NOT** getting enough articles about your book with a simple title search, please come talk to me directly.

**4. ADVANCED SEARCH**

Nearly all databases have an advanced search option that lets you to do sophisticated searches by combining the various concepts you have already identified for your search. The advanced search mode will also allow you specify which fields you want to search, including author name, article title, publication title, subject, etc.

1. ***QUALITY***

Most databases have limiting features that will let you focus the results of your search.You may be able to limit your searches to retrieve **only scholarly or peer-reviewed articles**. This is *always* a good choice because then you know that other scholars in the field have evaluated this writer’s published writing. You can also limit to **particular date ranges** or **particular journals**. Date ranges are particularly helpful if you are comparing/contrasting reactions to a canonical text (usually older texts) over larger periods of time

1. ***ADAPTING THE SEARCH***

***Narrowing*** If you are retrieving too many articles, focus your search by adding terms, limiting terms to particular fields, or by limiting your searches.

***Expanding*** If you are retrieving too few articles, expand your search by removing terms or searching for terms in keywords. Consider adding synonyms to your search if the ones you are using aren’t very effective.

***Be Flexible*** Above all, be flexible in your searching. If one term doesn’t work, try a different one. Approach your topic using as many search strategies as you can think of. If you get stuck, don’t spend all day with a futile search. Instead, **ask me or a librarian for help**.

**5. BOOLEAN OPERATORS: AND, OR, NOT**

When you want to combine search terms, you will need to use what are called Boolean operators or connectors. This is best done using the advanced search mode.

***And***

For example:  if you are researching ways to combat obesity, you need to split your search into two concepts: combat and obesity. Next, you need to connect these two terms with a Boolean operator. Using the operator **AND** will retrieve articles that mention **both terms** somewhere in the article. In this case, **AND** is the appropriate connector because you want to retrieve articles that address both concepts, combat and obesity. The use of **AND** generally will retrieve a **smaller set of results**.

***Or***

As another example, if you wanted to retrieve articles that dealt with either obesity or over weight, then the appropriate Boolean operator is **OR**. Using the operator **OR** between the search obesity OR overweight will retrieve articles that mention **either term**. The use of **OR** generally will retrieve a **larger set of results**. OR is especially useful when you are searching with terms that are synonyms or that deal with the same concept.

***Not*** or ***– (hyphen)***

If you wanted to **exclude terms**, you would use the Boolean operator **NOT** or a hyphen (without a space connecting the desired excluded term). For example, if you were interested in the subject obesity, but not interested in how fast-foods relate to obesity, you could exclude all items that have the term fast-foods by searching obesity NOT fast-foods. Effective use of Boolean operators is essential to sophisticated research.

**6. TRUNCATION**

Truncate search terms to retrieve all variants of a term. Truncation symbols vary from database to database. Examples include: \*, ?, !, % and $. Remember, truncation symbols vary from database to database. You can always check using the “Help” feature to see what your current database uses to make researching easier!

***Quotation Marks***

If you search the title of your book in quotation marks (i.e. “The Handmaid’s Tale” instead of The Handmaid’s Tale), your search will result in articles that only have those words in that exact sequence. This is especially helpful if you have a book title comprised of common words that result in vague search results.

***Asterick***

If you search on the term plagiar\* in ProQuest, you will retrieve articles that contain any words that begin with the letters plagiar, including: plagiarism, plagiarize, plagiarizing, plagiarized, plagiarizer, plagiarizers, plagiarist, etc. Using the truncation symbol will allow you to broaden your search to include materials on any term variant.

***Other Truncation***

For example, in EBSCO databases use ? to find one character only, or # to find one or more characters, like:

wom?n will search for information containing the words woman or women

hum#r will search for information containing the words humor or humour.

**7. BIBLIOGRAPHIES = GOLD**

When you’ve found a great article from a database, then you’ve struck gold! After using what you need to, scroll down to the bottom of that article to **look up all of the articles that author used to *create* the article**. Because you’ve used a peer-reviewed source that was published, there will be a list of other valuable sources on that novel you can look at. This is especially interesting when the author of your current article disagrees with someone that previously published about that novel. Happy reading!

**8. MAJOR WEB CONCERNS**

**No Subject Headings**

Encountering useless web pages are only one problem in using the Internet for research. There are many other major issues.  One problem is that nearly all search engines lack the sophisticated search capabilities that both library catalogs and databases provide.  Because of this, searches will often return results of thousands and thousands of web pages. **You will get better search results using subscription databases and library catalogs** rather than Internet search engines.

**Questionable Quality**

Because anyone can create a web page, the quality of information on the web is always in question. There is also an inordinate amount of repetitive, superficial information, often of a promotional or persuasive nature. Above all, the bias or slant of web sites must be considered, although it can frequently be difficult to determine a site’s particular bias. **As this is a RESEARCH paper, you need to stay away from value judgments and instead look for analysis of the writing itself.** In terms of literary criticism, you want to be wary of sites/blogs that simply review a book for what the reader’s *opinion* of it was.

**Questions To Consider**

Searching the web is very time-consuming because you need to consider many issues before using a web page in your research.

* Is the information from a respected and reliable source? If you can’t tell, the answer is probably no.
* What are the author’s credentials? If you can’t tell, the answer is probably that his/her credentials don’t exist.
* Why was the web page created? Is this a blog page to rant about literature? It should be clear from viewing the page.
* Is the information accurate? Biased? Outdated? Fact-checked?
* Are sources clearly cited? Is the writer citing other published sources in their discussion about the novel?

**Use Only When Appropriate**

Only after answering all of these questions can you be sure that your resource is appropriate for a research paper. The “About Us” section of a web page, if available, will often provide this information.

**Basically, Stick To Databases**

However, by searching only subscription databases and limiting your search to scholarly or peer-reviewed sources, you can virtually guarantee that all materials retrieved will be appropriate for a research paper.

A majority of this material was taken from Berkeley City College’s Library website, which can be found at: http://www.berkeleycitycollege.edu/wp/library/2011/04/04/databasesearchtips/