Searching the Journal Literature

**Principle #1: Research takes time.** You may need to consult multiple sources to conduct a thorough review. Searching for articles and then evaluating your results is time consuming. Don’t be discouraged.

**Principle #2: Be Informed.** Most databases have training videos and user guides that provide instruction regarding the content and features of that resource. While there are general search principles that work across systems, not all databases have the same options and features. Do your homework if you want to search like a pro.

**Principle #3: Be Creative and Flexible.** Creating a search strategy is not a linear process. You will not create a perfect search strategy on your first try. You’ll need to try out a variety of techniques before you retrieve the results you want.

**Principle #4: Reality Check.** There may not be a single article that answers your specific question. You may find that your question is only partially answered. Or you may discover that there is no definitive answer for your clinical problem. This is normal. Ultimately you need to make the best possible decision you can with the information you have.

**Search Strategy Tips**

1. Combine your own keywords and phrases with controlled vocabulary/subject terms when available (ie MeSH).
   a. Include *synonyms*. Generally, there is more than one way you can describe a concept. Think of all possible variables. For example: heart attack OR myocardial infarction.
   b. Try *broader or narrower terms* for your concept. For example, if you don’t find anything on Sjögren’s Syndrome, try broadening your search to Rheumatoid Arthritis or Arthritis.
2. Use **Boolean Operators** (AND, OR, NOT) to combine your search terms in logical ways. For example: Otitis media AND antibiotics; shin splints OR medial tibial stress syndrome; dementia NOT Alzheimer’s.
   a. **Boolean operators are in CAPS.** You need to type the operators in capital letters so the database does not ignore these words. When Boolean operators are in CAPS the search engine will know you are submitting a command, not a word to be searched.
3. Use **Nesting** to make sure your terms are searched in the combinations and groups of your choosing. For example: (shin splints OR medial tibial stress syndrome) AND (rehabilitation OR therapy)
4. **Use quotations marks.** Do you have a concept that is a phrase, like the *Affordable Care Act*? Place your phrase within quotations to search for your concept as a phrase instead of individual key words: “affordable care act”.
5. **Try wildcards (truncation).** Each resource may utilize different characters, so read the database documentation to learn what options are available. A common option that works across most systems
is the *. Place an asterisk at the end of a root word to retrieve all variations of the stem. For example child* will retrieve child, children, etc.

**a. NOTE for PubMed:** Tips #4 and #5 should be utilized sparingly, if at all if you are a novice searcher, since these features disable automatic term mapping. To learn more about ATM, review the PubMed tutorials or talk to your friendly librarian.

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