

# Tips for searching electronic resources

When you search electronic resources, there are various techniques you can use to ensure that you get the best set of results. These apply to databases and to the Internet, whether you use a search engine or a subject gateway.

## Search tips

### 1. Break down your search request into concepts

Search using only the main concepts of your query.

e.g. Does **smoking** cause **cancer**?

Search for the terms **smoking** and **cancer**

### 2. Think of synonyms and additional words

Think about all the different terms that people may use to write about your topic.

e.g. smoking/cigarettes/tobacco  
cancer/lung disease/heart disease

Also consider British and US spelling

e.g. anaemia/anemia    tumour/tumor

### 3. Use truncation/stemming

Add the appropriate wildcard (eg \*, ?, \$) to the stem of a word to search for all words that begin with that stem.

e.g. child\* retrieves child, children, childhood, childlike

### 4. Make use of phrase searching

Some resources require the use of quotation marks to search for words occurring next to each other.

e.g. "blood pressure", "congenital heart disease"

### 5. Use Boolean operators/search operators

Combine your search terms using the search operators AND, OR or NOT.



folic acid AND pregnancy will find items that contain both **folic acid** and **pregnancy**



smoking OR cigarettes will find items that contain either the word **smoking** or the word **cigarettes**

**NOT**    folic acid  anaemia

folic acid NOT anaemia will find items that contain the word **folic acid** but **not** the word **anaemia**

### 6. Use nesting

Nesting keeps concepts that are alike together.

Alcohol AND (adolescents OR teenagers)

This search will retrieve records on alcohol on adolescents as well as records on alcohol on teenagers.

### 7. Consult individual resource guides

PubMed, Web of Knowledge and Cochrane Library all have their own user tutorials.

### 8. Search for terms individually

It is usually best to search for terms individually and then combine them.

## What can I do if I get too few or too many hits?

### 1. Too few hits

- Check the spelling of your term
- think of synonyms or alternative terms
- use keywords if available
- broaden your search terms
- are you using the right database or search engine?

### 2. Too many hits

- consider additional search terms
- use the advanced search options
- limit your search by date, by publication type, by language.

**N.B.** We recommend you read the help pages of any database/search engine you use so as to find out what strategies you can/cannot use.

Imperial College London Library:  
www.imperial.ac.uk/library

Please use these Venn diagrams for your own searches using Boolean/search operators.

