

DATABASE SEARCHING TIPS: PART 1

By Marvin Hunn

The ATLA and WorldCat exercises are designed to make you think about how to search a structured, controlled-vocabulary metadata-based database using explicit operators and search syntax.¹ Practical points related to those exercises are summarized here.

Generalities

1. You may link to databases and reference works via the library website (<http://library.dts.edu>). The home page includes a search box for a few of the most frequently used databases. It also has a dropdown list of all databases. Not sure which database to use? The Guide to Databases and Reference Works (<http://library.dts.edu/guide>) may help. It is organized to help you find resources by topic. It contains descriptions of many databases and reference works, sometimes with links to tutorials. If you are off campus, you will be prompted to enter your DTS ID and library (WorldCat) password.
2. DTS Libraries provide access to scores of databases. But you don't have to learn how to use scores of search engines. Most of the databases are hosted by a few vendors (like EBSCO and ProQuest). Often all the databases from a given vendor use the same search engine and the same interface. Some databases from that vendor may have special features like a thesaurus or a cited-reference search, but all databases from that vendor will offer the same basics. Further, search engines from different vendors tend to have the same basic features implemented in similar ways. So your task is easy: learn the common core.
3. At this point in time, most library search engines do not support natural language queries; you can't just talk to the software like you would talk to a friend. You do need to know how to formulate search statements using a syntax the software can process. You do need to know how to use operators and how to group terms. This skill is easy to acquire.
4. Picking good search terms is far more important than using complex search statements. This is the key to success. We develop this idea below.
5. Many databases use standardized terminology for names and subjects. This is the "controlled vocabulary" approach to expressing access points. Understand the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, and use the standardized terminology.
6. Initial searches can often be improved. Evaluate the results of every search for possible improvements and then search again. Refine. Persist. We develop this idea below.
7. Precision is inversely related to recall (completeness). A very precise search will not be comprehensive or complete; a very complete search will not be precise—it will include many, many

¹ Confused by terminology like "metadata" and "controlled vocabulary?" If so, see <http://library.dts.edu/basic-concepts> as background.

irrelevant citations. Because of this inverse relation, you must sometimes choose between either high precision or high recall, and formulate your search statement accordingly.

8. If you are looking for very specific information, a brief citation or abstract may not suffice to tell you whether a particular work contains the information you need. Reading is often the only way to discover whether a source is helpful. Reading takes time and patience. Budget time accordingly.

How to Find Good/Better Search Terms

Selecting good search terms is extremely important. Sometimes you will need to find additional synonyms in order to formulate a more comprehensive search. At other times you will need to change terminology to formulate a more precise search. Listed below are some tactics to help you with both goals when you encounter problems. If you are searching a controlled vocabulary database, then focus on finding the correct standardized terminology for that particular database. If, on the other hand, you are searching a natural language database that lacks vocabulary control, then synonyms and use of phrases will be more important.

1. Execute successive searches to improve searches. Conduct preliminary searches in the database. At this preliminary stage you may search for “obvious” subject terms or you may search for relevant specific titles you already know about. Review results of every search for relevant new terminology. Note words used in titles. Note terminology used in subject headings. Execute new searches with the new terminology.² For example, an initial search for “pastor” retrieves some records. Examine those records and notice many of them use the LCSH term “clergy.” Include “clergy” as a search term. The successive searches approach can be used in any searchable database, even those that lack subject headings. This approach is just common sense, but it is commonly neglected because searchers are not willing to patiently and thoughtfully review results.
2. Browse headings. Some databases will let you browse term lists. Unclear on the distinction between searching and browsing? Searching allows you to look for any arbitrary word or combination of words anywhere in a record. Browsing is fundamentally different. It allows you to scan a sorted list of fields in various categories (author, title, subject, etc.). It is a two step process. Ordinarily you supply a word or words you expect to match the start of a field (e.g., the first two or three words of a title). The database then displays a sorted list with the closest match at the start of the list. Then you pick one or more specific entries from the list, and matching records are displayed. So browsing lets you see a list of potentially useful terms.
3. Use cross references. But many databases lack explicit cross references.
4. Consult thesauri. Check the Library of Congress subject heading guide or some other relevant list of subject headings. ATLA, ERIC, PsycINFO, and some other databases have their own thesauri similar

² The successive searches approach is sometimes called “recursive searching” or “using feedback” or even “pearling” (where the record you start with is the pearl, and you grow a string of pearls with successive searches based on subject headings in those records) or “following the tracings” (where subject headings and other access points in an antique printed catalog record were known as tracings).

to LCSH. Consulting LC is helpful even if the particular database you are searching uses something else as its list of standardized terminology. The most comprehensive multi-lingual, multi-disciplinary authority file is <http://viaf.org>.

5. Brain storm. Still don't have the magic terms? Step back and define what you need. List the distinct concepts. List synonyms for each concept. Remember to include central Bible passages. Record all of this in a master list of terms. At this point also take a minute to ask yourself what your goal is. What do you want: high precision or high recall? (See below discussion on how to retrieve more or less, which parallels how to increase recall or increase precision.)
6. Read before you search any more. Read an overview of your topic in an encyclopedia or textbook. Note additional terminology. Note bibliography at end of article. Read any highly relevant works you have already identified and think about what is really relevant. Continue to follow footnotes.³ Update your master list of search terms based on anything you read. Try your searches again.
7. Try a different database or specialized bibliography.
8. Evaluate terms one by one. If you have many terms, and you are trying to do a very thorough search in large database, then it may be worthwhile to execute individual mini-searches on each term or concept. You will discover some terms are unhelpful and should be discarded. Make the terms fit the specific database. The terminology you are using may fail in one database, but succeed in another.
9. Ask library reference staff for help. Ask faculty to recommend specific works.

How to Retrieve More

When your search retrieves insufficient material, take the following steps.

³ This process of using footnotes/references in one known work to find other useful works is sometimes called citation chaining. It is very common and very useful. But be sure you read what you cite!!! Citation indexes are a related topic. Citation indexes use citations (footnotes and other references) to associate or link documents together. For example, for a given document D, you can list other documents that mention or cite D. You are probably more familiar with the concept in Internet search engines that let you search for "pages that link to this page." Citation indexing is old. In the 1870s Frank Shepard devised a means of tracking legal precedent now named for him. To shepardize a case is to identify other cases and authorities that have discussed the case being shepardized. This will tell you, for example, if the case has been overturned or sustained. In 1961 Garfield applied this idea to scientific journal articles and created the Science Citation Index. Many citations indexes have been developed since then. Counseling majors at DTS will recognize a citation indexing function in the PsycINFO database, for example. Why would you want to use a citation index? Suppose the only source you have for your paper is an old article. You can't find anything else on the topic. Wouldn't it be nice to have a list of all the other articles that have interacted with the one article you have? Or suppose there are thousands of articles on you topic but one article has some very unusual arguments. Wouldn't it be nice to have a list of all the other articles that have interacted with the one article? There are no citation indexes for theology (although the Arts and Humanities Citation Index covers a few theology journals). Would someone out there please fill this pressing need?

1. First look for minor errors. Check spelling/typing and operator syntax. Spelling errors are the main cause of "zero hit" searches (searches that retrieve nothing).
2. Specify additional synonyms. Think broadly. They may be subject headings, title phrases, or call number ranges (in WorldCat, for example). You can even use specialty publishers as proxies for subject terms. What you do will depend on the specific situation. Sometimes there is an obvious solution; often there is not. The section on "How to find good/better search terms" tells you how to find synonyms. "OR" synonyms together.
3. Be less restrictive. As needed, relax logical, proximity, and field constraints in your search statement.
4. If your database searches metadata (author, title, subject) by default, but has an option to search the full-text of documents, try that option.
5. Consider using a different database or a print bibliography. The library has over 1500 specialized paper bibliographies. Use Google Scholar and Google Books.

How to Retrieve Less and/or Increase Precision

Some databases (like WorldCat) are so enormous that they will yield thousands or even millions of records for a general search. You can almost always limit the search to recent publications in English. Would just a few recent works meet your needs? More often you need to increase precision, not just reduce the number retrieved. And increasing precision can be a difficult task.

1. If your initial set is the result of AND-ing terms, consider using proximity operators or searching for exact phrases to increase precision.
2. If your initial search was a keyword search that included both subject words and title words, and there is a subject heading that closely matches what you need, then re-execute the search using the exact subject heading, and limiting it to subject headings only. (In some databases, a subject search may not be limited to subject headings. It may include words from both subject headings and titles.) No subject heading expressed what you need? Sometimes there is a stock phrase used in titles or abstracts or in the full text of the articles that does accurately reflect the concept. In such a case a title search for that phrase would be better than a search of the subject heading. Subject headings are not always the way to increase precision.
3. If there are still too many citations resulting from a subject search, then further reduce the set by requiring some of the same key terms appear as both subject and title words. This will probably also increase precision. If you are searching a free-text database that indexes every word in the documents, then limiting to title words almost always increases precision while decreasing recall.
4. If this set is still too large, and you can think of additional precise terms, then require that some of these terms also appear in the final set. In other words, AND another term or set to your previous set. Repeatedly add additional terms until it is a manageable size. This is sometimes called the "successive fractions" approach.

5. Abandon that database for the moment. Find some other source that will provide a short list of “best books” on the topic. How? Consult the bibliography in a textbook or the bibliography in an encyclopedia article or other reference book.

How to Group and Combine Terms

Ever have difficulty deciding how to group and combine terms into a search statement? Here is one approach to search statement formulation based on a table layout. First decide what concepts you need to combine to retrieve what you need. Represent each concept as a column in a table. There may be many ways of expressing each concept. These are search terms. List search terms on rows of the table.

Concept1. List below terms that express Concept1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Term1 • Term2 	Concept2 . List below terms that express Concept2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Term3 • Term4 	Concept3. List below terms that express Concept3 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Term5 • Term6 • Term7
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Your final search statement will use << OR >> to connect the terms and << AND >> to combine the columns.

(term1 OR term2)	AND	(term3 OR term4)	AND	(term5 OR term6 OR term7)
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So a search for healthful snacks for dogs might look like the following.

dogs	AND	(snack* OR treat*)	AND	(health* OR nutriti*)
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Field codes go with the terms. Here is a search for books by Smith on the topic of dog snacks.

AU smith	AND	SU dogs	AND	(SU snack* OR SU treat*) ⁴
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⁴ Some systems don't like field qualifiers before parentheses; others allow it. So some allow this: SU (snack OR treat) but some don't. Nearly all allow a field code paired with each term like this (SU snack OR SU treat).

Most databases offer a form for search terms where each column in the grid becomes a row in the form. This reversal can confuse. For example, the search form might look like this.⁵

Author	▼	smith
AND	▼	Subject
▼	Subject	▼
dogs		
AND	▼	Subject
▼	Subject	▼
(snack* OR treat*)		

You may want to mix field codes within a column. For example, suppose you want books on the 19th century Arminian treatment of predestination. You especially value books by Richard Watson, and nearly all books by him are about some aspect of Arminianism. So you might treat AU Watson as a synonym for Arminianism.

Arminian theology <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AU Watson, Richard • SU Arminian* 	predestination <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SU predestination • SU election
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(AU Watson OR SU Arminian*) AND (SU predestination OR SU election)⁶

Miscellaneous

Most systems treat punctuation as spaces/blanks. So the abbreviation N.T. (as in N.T. Wright = Nicholas Thomas Wright, or as in N.T. = new testament) might be treated as 'N T' for example.

Most systems ignore case. However, some systems require operators or field codes to be uppercase.

Bible searches may require special fields or special notation. In ATLA you will ordinarily use the SR field code like this: << SR 2nd Corinthians 3:18 >>. WorldCat indexes bible passages under the subject category but many WorldCat records use Roman numerals for chapters of the Bible and Arabic numerals for verses. So you might search WorldCat like this: << su:bible 2nd Corinthians iii 18 >>. However, that would retrieve only records that use common USA library standards. Other records in the WC database follow other conventions.

You will often want to treat a subject term and a bible passage as synonyms, for example love of neighbor and 1 Cor 13. In the ATLA database this will usually mean OR-ing the SR scripture reference field with either SU subject category or KW keyword category.

⁵ Alas, this search statement also gives us articles by smith about veterinary treatment of sick dogs. How could you improve the precision of this search statement?

⁶ This might retrieve works by Watson on **political** elections. How can improve precision by specifying the theological concept of divine election?

Pay special attention to how the search engine deals with a zero hit (nothing found) situation. Some systems will tell you they found nothing. Other systems will reformulate the search and try again for an approximate match.

Know the default operator of the search engine you are using.

Don't hesitate to ask for help. Library reference staff are available by email, phone and in person.