SEMANTIC SEARCH IN JSTOR

JSTOR now offers an AI powered Semantic Search option in addition to the traditional Keyword Search option. As of 7/22/25, Semantic Search is still in the beta stage of development. To see and use the Semantic Search option, you must go to the JSTOR website and sign-in with your personal (free) JSTOR account.

Below we contrast Keyword and Semantic options. We will look for scholarly sources that discuss how US presidents use religious language in their speeches.

Keyword Search

Figure 1 shows a traditional keyword search statement that uses operators. We use quotes to match the phrase "religious language," and we use the logical operator AND to combine terms. So we have this: << presidents AND "religious language" AND speeches >>.



Figure 1

Our search yields 263 items. The first item seems to be relevant. Note the "263 results" label is followed by a button for "Keyword results" and another button for "Semantic results." The red arrow points to Keyword, and Keyword is selected.

What happens if we continue with the Keyword option but use a natural language sentence to express what we want? We ask for this:

<< How do presidents use religious language in their speeches? >>

Since there are no explicit operators, JSTOR supplies the default operator AND. It searches the full-text and lists over 21 thousand articles that have these search terms somewhere in the text. It ranks by relevance. The first item does not seem helpful (but the second is). This is not the best way to use Keyword searching. See Figure 2.



Semantic Search

The search in Figure 3 is identical to the search in Figure 2 except the "Semantic results" button is selected. We have activated the new AI option. During beta testing, semantic search always lists the top 25 results. The first item seems to be very relevant.

	All Content	Images	Advanced Search		
JSTOR	How do presidents use religious language in their speeches Q				
	Top 25 results		Keyword results	Semantic results	Submit feedback
	 JOURNAL ARTICLE Religion in American Presidential Campaigns, 1952-2016: Applying a New Framework for Understanding Candidate Communication Christopher B. Chapp, Kevin Coe Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, Vol. 58, No. 2 (JUNE 2019), pp. 398-414 , and opponent strategy - that may help explain why political candidates use religious language . We employ this framework in a large-scale computer-assisted content analysis of U.S. presidential campaign speeches from 1952 to 2016. Findings reveal that the Reagan shift observed in prior research was driven specifically DOURNAL ARTICLE Religious Rhetoric and the Ethics of Public Discourse: The Case of George W. Bush Rogers M. Smith Political Theory, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Apr., 2008), pp. 272-300 				

...critics of ethical restraints on **religious** discourse have grounds to criticize the **religious** rhetoric of President George W. Bush. Quantitative and qualitative studies show that Bush has used a distinctive "prophetic" mode of **religious** expression more often than any modem predecessor. This sort of **religious** discourse is argued to be eth...

Figure 3

If you compare the search results in Figure 1 (where the search statement uses operators) with the search results in Figure 3 (where the search statement uses natural language and AI processing), then you see both searches produce reasonably helpful results for this example topic. But the semantic search option is easier to use. It resembles a search in Google, for example.

At present the JSTOR Semantic results option is powered by "All-MiniLM-L6-v2." That is a low-cost open-source AI product. We expect JSTOR to progress to more advanced products. But already Semantic Search is useful.

See our document "Using Semantic Search" for a brief explanation of how semantic search works and how to build on its strengths and deal with its weaknesses. Yes, it does have weaknesses!!!