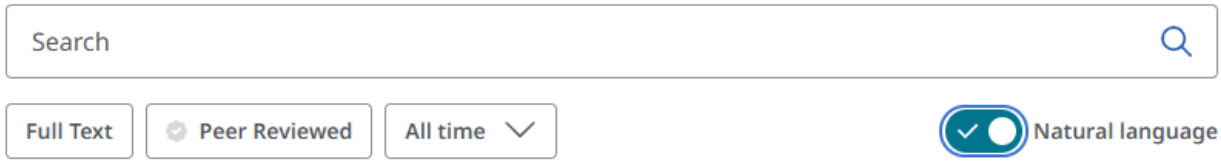
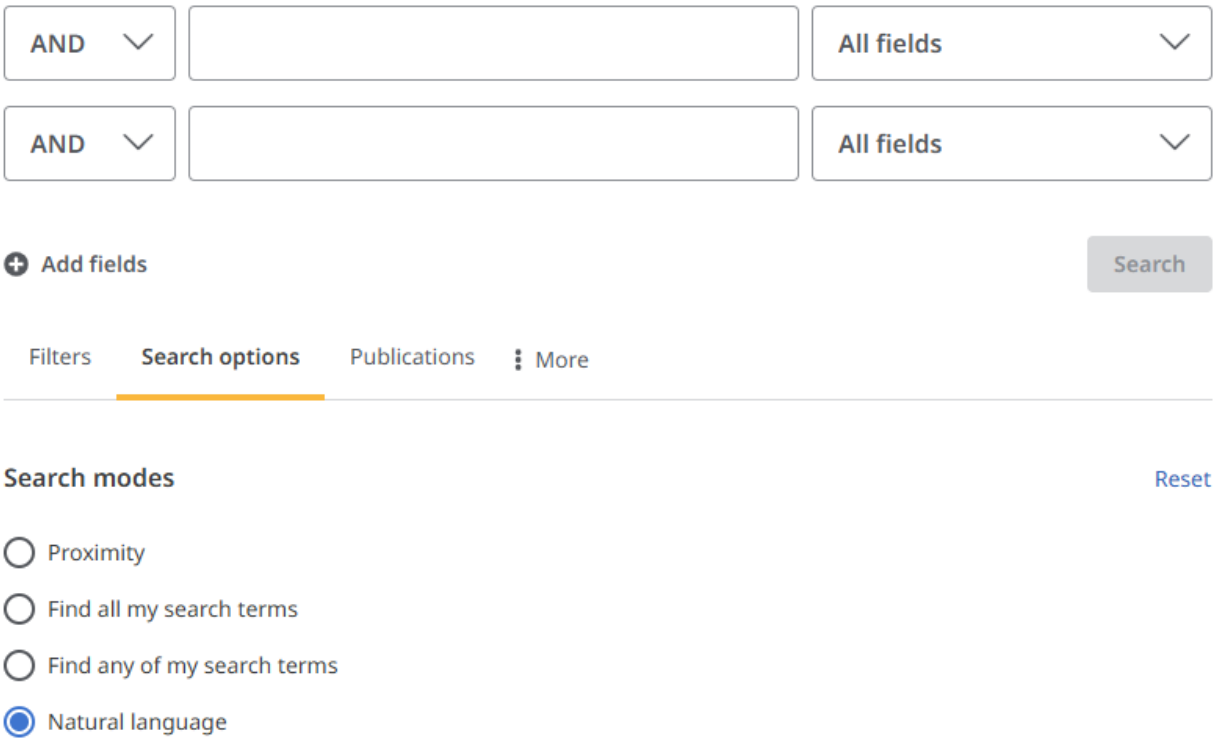
NATURAL LANGUAGE SEARCHING IN EBSCO DATABASES

EBSCO has added an optional AI feature to its search engine that provides a more Google-like experience. The new AI feature is called "Natural Language Search Mode." It is a tool that makes it easier for you to execute a search using traditional search technology (not state-of-the-art AI powered Semantic Search). So it is an AI frontend to the traditional search technology. It is not a total AI replacement for the traditional search technology.

To activate it from the Basic Search screen, just pick the Natural Language option. See image below. (The "Natural Language" button sometimes appears on the left margin and sometimes appears on the right margin, depending on the sequence of steps you take to get to the page, and the width of the device you are using to display the screen.)



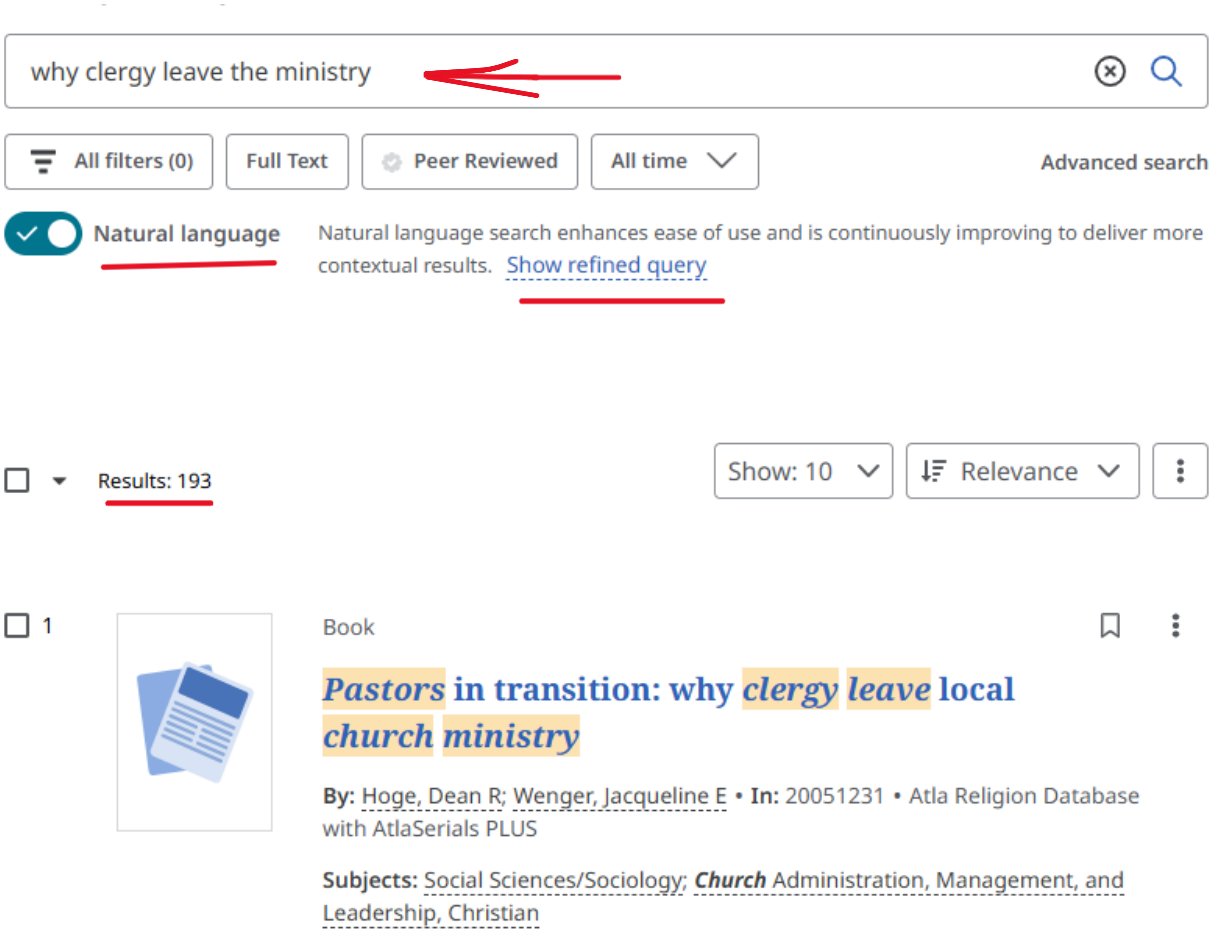
To activate it from the Advanced Search Screen, pick the Search Options tab ➔ Search Modes ➔ Natural language. See image below.



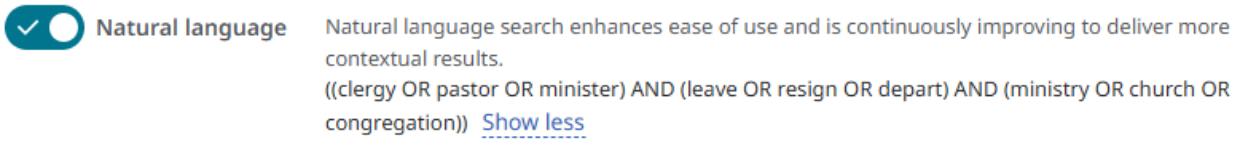
Natural Language search mode helps you formulate a search statement. Just supply a prompt consisting of a simple phrase, or a few sentences describing what you want. Then click the search icon. The NL feature will identify the key concepts in the prompt, select various synonyms that can be used to express the concepts, formulate a traditional search statement, search, and show the results. By "traditional" we mean a search statement that uses logical operators like AND or proximity operators like NEAR. EBSCO Natural Language search mode is **not providing state-of the-art semantic search** based on vector space retrieval such as you might get with OpenAI's ChatGPT, Anthropic's Claude, or Google's Gemini. (Interestingly, EBSCO does use Claude for its AI Insights feature which lists key ideas from an article.)

Depending on how you use it, the EBSCO AI can help you be more precise or more thorough in your searching. And it frequently reduces the amount of time it takes to find good search terms.

In the example below we provide the prompt <<why clergy leave the ministry>>. The search engine formulates a search and displays a list of 193 items.



In the image above, note the "Show refined query" link which offers to display the actual query (search statement). The search statement is displayed in image below.



The search statement is:

(pastor OR clergy OR minister)

AND (leave OR resign OR quit)

AND (ministry OR church OR congregation)

So AI analyzed the prompt, identified three concepts, provided three terms for each concept, and formulated a search statement. That search statement might or might not be adequate to meet your needs.

You can edit the search statement as needed to improve it. For example, if you wanted a much more comprehensive search, you could experiment with the following additional terms.

Possible terms for the concept of pastors/ministers

clergy* OR pastor* OR priest* OR minister* OR preacher*

OR ex-pastor* OR ex-clergy* OR ex-priest* OR ex-minister*

For the concept of leaving/departure

Relocation OR quit OR leave OR resign* OR "voluntary exit"

OR attrition OR turnover OR "career change"

For the concept of ministry/job

ministry OR pastorate OR church OR parish OR congregation

OR job OR position OR career OR employment OR unemployed

So the Natural Search feature is not trying to create a thorough or comprehensive search statement. But it is creating a search statement good enough for many purposes.

Here are a few warnings.

1. Whenever you use AI features of any kind, always assess the results and help the AI as needed. **Never accept results without assessment**. Think.
2. Do not use the Natural Language option to search the Atla Religion Database for a specific chapter in the bible. Instead use the SR (scripture reference) field code and the following format.

SR "John 3"

SR "Corinthians, 1st 10"

The Natural Language mode can search for specific chapter and verse, and sometimes is works well, but often it performs poorly. The SR approach is reliable and consistent.

3. In our very limited testing, the Natural Language option sometimes behaved irregularly when our prompt was only one or two words. Sometimes the system did not reveal what search statement was used when NL was chosen. Sometimes it revealed the search statement and it was just two words; NL did not supply extra synonyms. << pistis Christou >> is one example.
4. In our very limited testing, the NL option choked on large prompts. For example, when we used article abstracts as prompts, the system found nothing and suggested we simplify. It failed to identify the main idea of the abstract. That is something general AI (like ChatGPT or Gemini or Claude) can do, so we expect improvement in this area.