

## SEARCHING ONLINE DATABASES

The ability to search effectively for information using electronic (online) resources is a necessary skill in this information age. Before attempting to use a database it helps to be aware of the following features that are typical of almost all databases.

### HELP SCREENS

Although all databases have Help screens that you can access whenever you need them, you may have difficulty using them if you aren't familiar with the basic concepts and terms used in online searching.

### RECORDS

Understanding the structure of a database can help you locate and retrieve information more efficiently. Information about each item in a database is called a **record** (citation). Each record is composed of individual elements of information called **fields**. Fields in a record could include the author, article title, magazine or journal title, and subject headings. These fields can be used as access points when searching a database.

### KEYWORDS

In each online database a computer program indexes the records based on significant words used within each record's fields. Those words become "searchable" and are called **keywords** (uncontrolled vocabulary). Keywords may appear in an article title, summary of the article, or even in the text of the article.

### SUBJECT HEADINGS

In the subscription online databases that you will be using at DVC Library, indexers or catalogers have reviewed articles and assigned **subject headings** using a standard list of subject terms. This specific list of subject terms is called "controlled vocabulary." The indexer selects the appropriate subject headings and adds them to the record for the article.

### SEARCH STRATEGY

First do a keyword search using the words you think best describe your idea. Then look through your results until you find an item that seems to match your request. Click on the

title to view the full record for this item. Then scroll to the bottom of the screen and click on the highlighted subject heading that seems to best describe your topic.

### **BOOLEAN OPERATORS (AND, OR, NOT)**

Most online databases allow you to use the connector words AND, OR, and NOT to combine keywords.

Use AND to narrow a search. Both terms must be present in any records you retrieve. E.g., global warming AND forests; animal testing AND cosmetics

Use OR to expand a search. Your search will retrieve records with either of the terms. E.g., children OR adolescents; counseling OR psychotherapy; death penalty OR capital punishment

Use NOT to exclude a term. Records with the first term will be retrieved, but any records with the second term will be eliminated.

E.g., Mexico NOT New Mexico; special education NOT hyperactivity; Vietnam War NOT movies

### **WILDCARDS (TRUNCATION)**

Wildcards allow you to search for a root form of a word and pick up any ending. Computers find words exactly as you type them. Sometimes you may need different forms of the word. Different databases use different symbols to truncate words. Some common symbols are \*, ?, and #. Use a database's HELP to find the correct symbol.

E.g., **child\*** retrieves child, child's, children, childless;  
**politic?** retrieves politic, politics, political, politically, politician, politicians  
**Afghan#** retrieves Afghan, Afghans, Afghani, Afghanistan

### **LIMITERS**

Most databases allow you to limit your search by date, by full text (availability of complete article only), or by name of magazine in which articles appear. Taking advantage of these limiters can shorten your search time.