Using Boolean Searches to Focus Your Research

What is Boolean Searching?

If you search by a single keyword (e.g., romance) you will retrieve too much information on a topic. A very small percentage of the information you retrieve will focus on your research needs. Boolean searching allows you to focus on a subset of the broader topic (e.g., romance and literature and fiction). This narrowing down allows you to find information much more quickly and easily. Boolean searching often uses keywords to search an entire record. Record information often includes a citation, abstract and descriptors. In some instances the full text of an article can be searched as well.

How Boolean Searching Works:

Boolean searching allows you to combine keywords using AND, OR, and NOT (e.g., romance and literature and fiction).

Phrase searching: Use quotation marks to indicate that certain words should be searched for as a phrase (e.g., “women’s suffrage”).

Truncation: Use “?” in the Library Catalog and “*” in most databases to search for variants of a root word (e.g. femini* will retrieve feminism, feminist, feminine).

Example searches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Search Strategy</th>
<th>Will Retrieves Records With</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>autoethnography AND “united states”</td>
<td>“autoethnography” and “united states” in title, subject headings, and chapter titles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>autoethnography NOT autobiography</td>
<td>only “autoethnography” and eliminating records with autoethnography that also contain “autobiography”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>autoethnography OR ethnography</td>
<td>either “autoethnography” or “ethnography” or both terms anywhere in the record</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>autoethnography AND cultur?</td>
<td>“autoethnography” and any of the following variants: culture, cultural, cultures, cultured</td>
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The Process:

Start by determining your focus of research.
   Example: autoethnographic writing on your subculture of college freshmen

Write down words or phrases that are central to your research
   Example: ethnography, students, college, university

Determine how you want to combine these terms using Boolean
   Example: ethnography AND students AND (college OR university)

Continue to refine your search as necessary by adding more keywords and Boolean operators.

Once you find some information that may be relevant remember that it is up to you to sort through all of the records you have retrieve to find the best information for your topic. You must look at all of the information critically and select material that is best suited for your argument. For further assistance consider consulting with your instructors, a librarian, the Writing Center or your classmates.

If you need help finding sources for your assignment please feel free to contact the Undergraduate Instruction and Outreach Librarian, Tami Albin at albin@ku.edu.