Practical Search Tips

Formulating the Query

1. **Identify your topic**

   You will need to break down your topic of interest into concepts. For example, if you wanted to find information on oral histories of El Salvadorian women who immigrated to the Unites States, your concepts would be: El Salvador, women, oral history and immigration.

2. **List the concept keywords**

   Some concepts may have only one word while others may have several.

   For example:

El Salvador	oral history	women	immigration
	stories	female	immigrants
	biographies	gender	refugees
			illegal

3. **If you want to include a two word concept, enclose in quotation marks**

   For example: heart disease = "heart disease"

4. **Specify the logical relationship among your keywords (Boolean logic).**

   Once you know the keywords you want to search, you need to establish the logical relationships among them. Boolean logic allows you to specify the relationships among search terms by using any of three logical operators: AND, OR, NOT (some also allow + and -). You must check each search engine to see what Boolean logic they use.

AND: Limits your search
            Oral History AND Women
            Only returns pages with <u>both</u> of these terms on them

OR: Broadens your search
            Oral History OR Women
            Returns every page with <u>either</u> of these terms on them

NOT: Limits your search
            Oral History NOT Women
            Only returns pages that contain one but <u>not</u> the other term on them

5. Remember to use Wildcards (Truncation)

Wildcards are special characters (usually *) that can be appended to the root of a word or included in a word so you can search for all possible endings to the word or spellings.

Example:

rocket* will yield rocket, rockets, rocketry
psycholog* will yield psychology, psychological, psychologist
colo*r will yield color and colour

Search Tips

1. Read the search directions at each search engine site. The technique to apply depends on which search engine you are using.

   For example, a search about the relationship between latitude and temperature could be:
    +latitude + temperature
   latitude + temperature
   latitude AND temperature

2. Include synonyms or alternate spellings (can connect the terms with OR logic).

3. Check spelling

4. Some search engines may be case sensitive.

5. Repeat with different "tactics" within Search engines.

6. Repeat (or experiment) with different search engines.

7. Try a meta search engine.

<u>Troubleshooting</u>

What do I do when I get no results?

- Reread the search engine's description.
- Check the spelling.
- Check Boolean syntax
- Be less specific in your search.
- Try synonyms and variations in the word.
- Try another search engine.

What do I do if I get too many hits?

- Be more specific
- Use distinctive words, use more relevant keywords

I get no response or and error message.

The server might return an error message or not allow any connections. "No answer", "Timed Out", or "Too Busy", are some of the most common type of messages you may get. If this happens:

- Try again later (couple of minutes or wait until a less busier time of the day). Be aware of Time Zones.
- Where is the server's location? If it is far away (foreign country) the response time may be delayed. Be aware of Time Zones.

"Error 404, Page/File not Found". The link may no longer exist or the URL may have changed.

- Double check the URL, make sure you entered it in correctly. Usually the first part (protocol://host.domain) is not case sensitive but the remaining can be.
- Check for any non-alphanumeric symbols.
- If your URL has more than one directory try to delete the last level and try again.

"Permission denied": it may be that the site is denying public access.

- Try again later. Sometimes the restricted access is only for certain times of the day.
- Try to contact the site authors or webmasters.