Finding useful sources is one of the challenges of conducting academic research. This handout will help you decide where to begin and how to refine your database searches for more precise results.

**Searching Databases**

You can find a wide variety of databases on the University of Maryland’s Health Sciences and Human Services Library website: http://www.hshsl.umaryland.edu/resources/databases/

Some databases, like Academic Search Premier, are more general. Others, like PSYCHinfo, are subject-specific. If you’re not sure which database to choose, try using the library’s “Filter By Subject Category” feature, located underneath the search bar.

**Refining Your Search**

**Search Terms**

Begin by brainstorming key concepts and terms related to your topic, jotting them down on a piece of paper. Try to include as many synonyms as possible.

Try simple searches first, using only a few specific terms. While performing a basic search, do not type in long phrases. This will only yield results if an article contains the exact phrase, which is unlikely.

**Quotation Marks**

Placing a phrase inside quotation marks will yield an exact phrase.

*Example:* “Prescription drugs” will yield the exact phrase, not other phrases containing the same words, such as “prescription heart drugs.”

If you are searching for a phrase that includes “and,” “or,” or “not,” using quotation marks will help the database recognize that these are search terms rather than Boolean operators (see below).

*Example:* “Bread and butter”

**Truncated Words**

You can expand your search by using the base of the word; this way, your results will include keywords in different forms. Use an asterisk [*] to stand for any number of characters, a question mark [?] to stand for exactly one character, and an exclamation mark [!] to stand for one or no characters.
Example: Nurs* will yield nurse, nursing, nurses, etc.

Wildcard Words
Similarly, you can replace certain letters with symbols to create wildcard terms. This can also be useful for words that are spelled differently in the U.S. and the U.K.

Example: colo!r (will yield color and colour)

Stop Words
Databases often exclude common words (“a,” “an,” “the,” “if,” “to,” “are,” etc.) from searches; otherwise, the search would yield far too many results. If these words are part of your search, enclose them in quotation marks.

Example: “Beauty and the Beast”

AND, OR, and NOT (Boolean Operators)

Using “AND”
Use “AND” to narrow your results and to tell the database that ALL terms must be present. In many databases, “AND” is automatically placed between your search terms. For example, the search “education reform standardized testing” is translated to “education AND reform AND standardized AND testing.” To avoid confusion, place phrases in quotation marks.

Example: “education reform” AND “standardized testing”

Using “OR”
Use “OR” to broaden your search by telling the database that any of your search terms can be included in the results.

Example: vaccination OR inoculation

Using “NOT”
Use “NOT” to narrow your search by excluding certain words, particularly those that are commonly associated with your other search terms.

Example: “infectious diseases” NOT influenza

Further Refinement
To get even more precise results, narrow your search using precise fields (author, subject, etc.) and, if applicable, searching for items within a particular date range.

References