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Search techniques: How to do a good search

How to do a good search

Ask us

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Getting started: define your search

It is very important to define your topic of interest and prepare your search well before executing it. This will help you retrieve the most relevant and pertinent information. Keep in mind that depending on the topic you choose, you will retrieve more or less information.

- Identify the most important concepts and express them in the form of **keywords** .
- Complement these keywords by looking for **synonyms** , as a term can be expressed in different ways. Enter the **key terms in English or in other languages** if you want to retrieve documents in other languages as well. Use dictionaries to find synonyms and translations.

Search type

Most search engines offer two types of search:

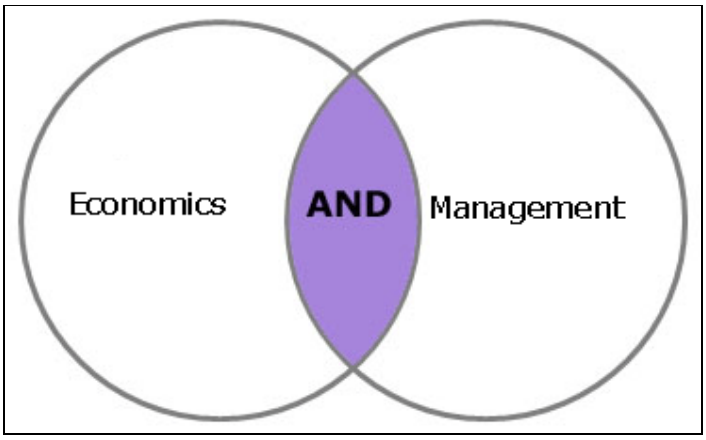
- **Basic search** : search by keyword, one or more terms.
- **Advanced search** : allows you to perform a more complex search, combining words and search fields and limiting it by other concepts such as language, publication date, etc. It offers more precise results.

Search tricks

- **Entire phrases** : Search for exact, complete phrases by entering the text in quotation marks (" ").
  - "digital literacy"
  - "international day against gender violence"
  - "school segregation"

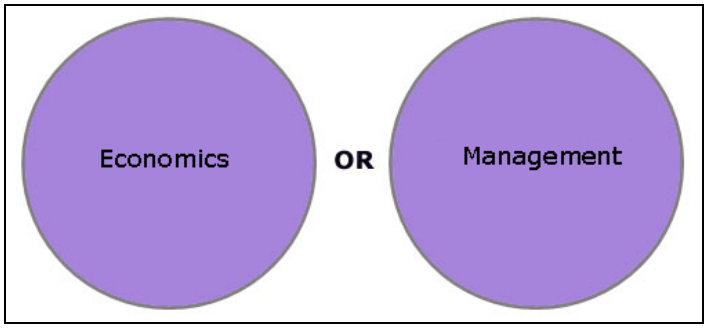
- **Boolean or logical operators** :

  - **AND** : Used to combine concepts, it is the default search in search engines. The more terms, the fewer documents retrieved but the more specific. You will retrieve documents that contain all the terms you have indicated.



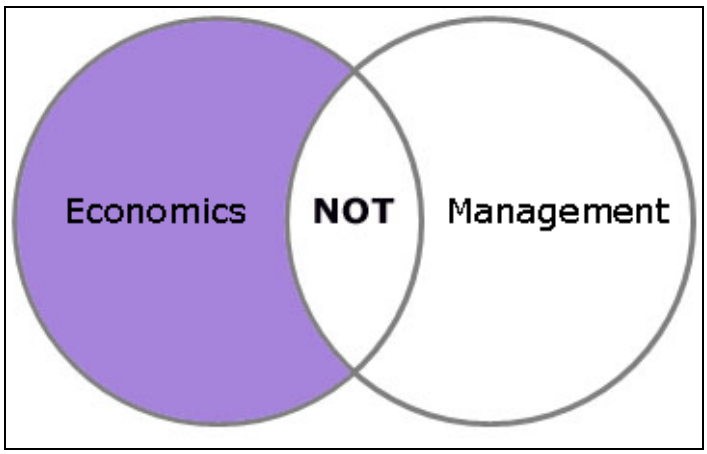
Example: Economics AND Management: documents that include these two terms at the same time, together, will be retrieved.

- **OR** : expands the search, used to combine synonyms. The more terms, the more documents you will retrieve. The documents will contain at least one of the terms you have indicated.



Example: Economics OR Management: documents that include one of these two terms separately, or both together, will be retrieved.

- **NOT** : excludes the terms you specify from the search. The retrieved documents will contain some but not other terms.



Example: Economics NOT Management: documents that include the word Economics but do not contain the word Management will be retrieved. The term Management is excluded from the documents we want to retrieve.

- **Proximity operators** : These are the ones that allow you to establish proximity relationships between search terms. They are the following: ADJ, WITH, NEAR. For example:
  - ADJ University Library
  - WITH Informative Resources

  Use NEAR to search for words that are close to each other and in any order.

- **Wildcards:** Use the asterisk (*) to replace up to five characters in a word, starting at the position of the asterisk. Use (**) to replace any number of characters, not counting spaces. The question mark (?) replaces a single character anywhere in the word.

Is our search strategy good?

These two concepts will help you evaluate your search strategy:

- **Document noise** : occurs when irrelevant documents, unwanted documents, and documents that are not of interest are obtained in addition to those that are.
  Solution: The search strategy must be redesigned to make it more precise:
  - uses the Boolean operators **AND** and **NOT**
  - use other options offered by the advanced search (chronological interval, language,...).

- **Documentary silence** : occurs when no information is retrieved on the topic you are interested in.
  Solution: You need to reformulate your search strategy to make it broader:
  - uses **synonyms** for keywords and the translation of these terms,
  - use the Boolean operator **OR** between search terms
  - Use **wildcards** for character substitution: ***** and ****** (or those used in each database)

Types of search engines

There are three types of tools that will help you find the information you need:

- Search engines : They can be generic or academic and retrieve information based on the term or terms entered in the search box. Academic search engines provide scientific information (journal articles, research papers, peer-reviewed publications, doctoral theses, conference papers, etc.). There are also thematic search engines , which specialize in a subject.
- Multi-search engines : allow you to run the search simultaneously in more than one engine.

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