

Constructing Effective Search Statements

Every time you type words into a search screen, whether in PITT*Cat*, the Internet or in a database like EI Compendex, you need to formulate an appropriate search query. There are a few basic “rules” to consider when you develop a search strategy. By following these ideas, you will ensure that you find the most relevant records available.

For this handout, we will assume that you have been given this assignment:

Write a short paper about incidents of censorship, or the possibility of censorship, on the World Wide Web.

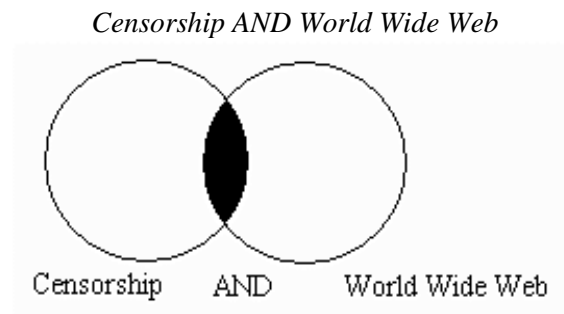
1) Most Important Concepts

The database or Internet search engine will look for all of the documents within its indexes of articles or Web pages that contain the words you have included in your search query. For this reason, it’s important that you type in only the words that are most important to your search. For this assignment, you will want to search for the words “censorship” and “World Wide Web.”

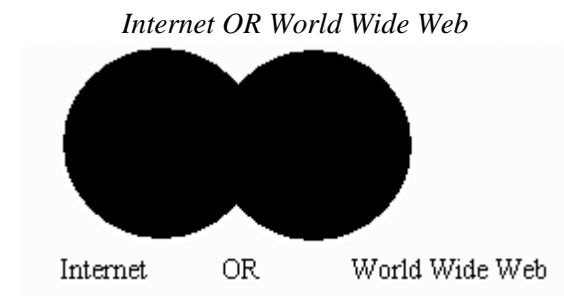
2) Boolean Operators

Now that you have chosen the most important words for your search query, you will want to combine these terms using Boolean Operators. Boolean operators are the words AND, OR and NOT. The dark spaces in the Venn diagrams below show the information that will be found with each search query.

AND – Use AND when you want to find records that contain all the terms you type in. Since you want to look for records that contain the words “World Wide Web” and “censorship,” you would use AND in your query like this:

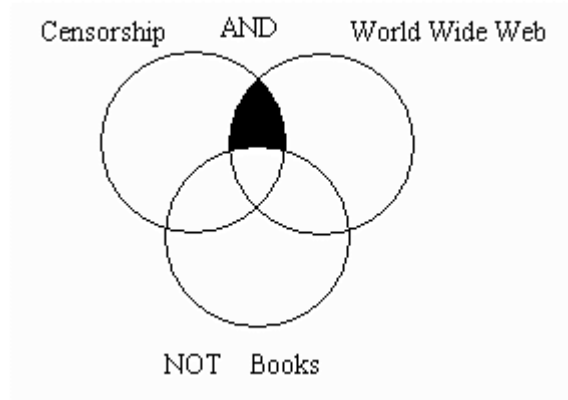


OR – Use OR when you want to find records that contain ANY of the search terms you type in. This operator should be used when one of your search terms has synonyms or is often used interchangeably with another word. For example, the World Wide Web is really one component of the Internet, and some writers use the terms interchangeably. Therefore, you might use OR like this:



NOT – Use NOT when you want to exclude certain items from your search. For example, if you found that your searches were returning too many articles or Web pages about book censorship that did not include enough information about World Wide Web censorship, you might want to construct a search query like this:

Censorship AND World Wide Web NOT Books



4) Proximity Operators

Proximity operators are another useful tool in constructing a more precise search query. Proximity operators determine how close one word is to another word in the results that are returned. For example, if you type in this search query,

Censorship AND World Wide Web

The search engine or database might read your search query as though you typed it in like this:

Censorship AND World OR Wide OR Web.

Your search might return some articles with the terms, “censorship” and “world” in them, some articles with the words “censorship” and “Web” in them, and so on. These articles may not be about the World Wide Web at all.

To make sure that the computer will look for the term “World Wide Web” as a phrase, rather than as individual words, you will want to type in this search query:

Censorship AND “World Wide Web”

The quotation marks ensure that the computer looks for the term as a phrase, rather than as specific words.

5) Truncation

You will want to use a truncation symbol when you want to find records that contain the different forms of a word. A truncation symbol will be either an asterisk (*) in most databases or a question mark (?) in PittCat.

This search, for example,

Censor AND Internet*

Will return records that contain the words “censor,” “censors” and “censorship.”