Search Tips for databases and the library catalog

Choose your Search Terms wisely.
- When you write your research question, your beginning search terms are the most important words that describe your topic. (Hint: These are often nouns.)
- Brainstorm search terms, thinking of synonyms and related words
- Try using a built-in Thesaurus in your database
- Use the subject terms in your results to come up with more and better search terms

Use the search tools in the database/catalog to specify what you want.
- Use limiters such as date, scholarly journals, full-text
- Use the drop down boxes for author, subject, title, etc.
- You may need to go to Advanced Search to find some of these features.

Figure out how the search function works to use it effectively.
- Boolean operators (AND, OR, and NOT) are required by some search functions, otherwise they may assume all terms are required or that you have entered an exact phrase. (Try your search different ways to see if it makes a difference.)
- Some searches will default to looking in the full text of articles, which others (like the catalog) only look in the major descriptors of the items, such as title, author, and subject. Adjust accordingly.
- Look for a Help link to find out how to use the search more effectively.

Working with your results.
- Be aware of how the results are sorted (relevance or date?) and change it if you wish.
- Narrow within the results. This may be a separate search box or you can add more words to your original search.
- Be sure you get your citation information!

If you have too few results, consider....
- Using a broad search like the Discover Search, Proquest Central or Academic Search Complete instead of a subject-specific database.
- Using different search terms, especially less specific search terms (e.g. “mental health” instead of “depression.”)
- Do you need Boolean operators? (Add AND between concepts and OR between synonyms)
- Try searching within the text of the article/ebook
- Increase the date range and choose more different formats.

If you have too many results or the results are not specific enough consider....
- Using a discipline or format-specific database or narrowing by discipline.
- Use more specific search terms
- Narrow your results by date and format
- Use dropdown boxes to specify that your search terms are subject, author, title, etc.
- Eliminate searching within the text

Ask a Librarian if you need help! (It’s why we’re here!)