MODULE 1: EFFECTIVE SEARCHING
LESSON 2: SMART SEARCHING METHODS

Title
Effective Searching

Module 1, Lesson 2

Smart Searching Methods

Introduction
Once you've determined which of your library's databases are likely to contain the information you need, the next step is to formulate a search strategy. In this lesson, you'll learn the following steps in searching successfully:

» Choose the right words and phrases for your topic and purpose

» Combine them into a well-crafted search string that tells the database what you want

» Evaluate your results and adjust your search strategy if needed

Choosing Search Terms
Think of a scholarly database as a vault that holds thousands upon thousands of articles, books, and other sources. Your key to unlock this vault is your search string: the set of words, phrases, and punctuation you enter into a search box to tell the database what you're looking for. Every database will look and function a little differently, but you can almost always use the same strategies to get good results.

First, try to match your terms with the language in the sources you'd like to find—that is, think of the terminology that is most likely to be used by scholars writing about your topic. These key words and phrases will help connect you with the most relevant results. Scholarly publications use scholarly, formal language. So if you come up with two equivalent words or phrases, it might help to choose the one that seems more formal and less casual. The formal term *influenza* brings up more search results than the colloquial term *flu*.

Next, think of synonyms and related terms that might be used instead of the main terms you're searching. For example, in a search about seventeenth-century New York City, you might also want to use the search term *New Amsterdam*, which was the city's official name at that time. In a search about cooking, you might want to use the related

term *recipes*; it's not exactly a synonym, but it will yield results that are closely related to your topic.

Putting Terms Together

Once you've decided on a set of terms to use, it's time to begin putting them together. The way you combine your search terms will serve as a set of instructions for the database, telling it what you want to see and what you don't.

For more precise results, use quotation marks around multi-word search terms. This is known as a phrase search. It tells the database to retrieve only results where these words are used together in a certain order. If you're researching the theatrical group Blue Man Group, a key word search for *blue man group* will retrieve any article where these three words appear, even if they are separated by other words or are out of order. On the other hand, a phrase search for *"blue man group"* in quotation marks will retrieve only articles where the words appear together in that order. The second group of search results is much smaller and easier to review.

Boolean Operators

Consider using special words called Boolean operators: AND, OR, and NOT. These words give the database additional information about how to process a search that uses more than one term. Let's look at some examples.

» AND tells the database to retrieve all of the results that contain **both** Term A and Term B. It narrows the search by leaving out results in which one term, but not the other, is used.

» OR tells the database to retrieve all of the results that contain **either** Term A or Term B. It expands the search to include all instances where either term appears. This will be the largest set of results — remember it as "OR means more."

» NOT tells the database to include one term but exclude the other. It narrows the search by leaving out any result that contains the second term.

A Boolean operator should always appear in all capital letters. This tells the database to use the capitalized word as an instruction, not as a word that is part of your search.

You can use Boolean operators not just with single words, but with phrases in quotation marks. For example, to search for information on bicycle lanes and traffic safety, link the two phrases together with AND.

For a more complex search, you can use parentheses to group a set of Boolean operators. The database will perform the commands inside the parentheses first, then process the results. In this example, the search string will find one set of results that use either the term *college* or the term *post-secondary education*, find the results that discuss both Texas and Louisiana, and then show only the results that overlap.

Assessing Search Results

Your next step is to assess your search results and see how they line up with your informational needs. Does the set of search results fit all the criteria of your query?

You can often change the way your search results display, and sometimes this is helpful in seeing what exactly is there. Sorting by date allows you to see the newest results first and the oldest last, or vice versa. This can give you a sense of whether your search results are complete enough. If the most recent source is 20 years old, you may need to do a new search that yields a more current set of results, depending on your topic. Sort your results by date, using the year and, if possible, the month, to see which results are most current.

You can also choose to display results by relevance. This gives you a quick sense of how many articles really focus on your search terms. If there are a couple of pages of articles that look promising, that may be a sign that you have a good set of search results. On the other hand, if only one or two of the articles in your list are truly relevant to your topic, it may be time to rethink your search strategy.

A search that is too specific may yield few or no results. Try doing your search again with one or more general terms in your search string. When you have a good set of results, narrow your search to full-text articles whenever possible. This will ensure that all of your results are immediately accessible.

Build on Good Sources

Once you've discovered one or more sources that are a good fit, you can use them as a springboard to find additional content. There are two ways to capitalize on a useful source.

First, take a look at the references. This is a good way to find related articles or books. You may also find that the same author has published and cited previous works on the same topic.

Second, look at the database record for the source. Many databases assign subject headings to describe the content of an article or book. These terms may be a person's name, a specialized term, or another word or phrase that explains what the source is about. Clicking on the subject heading will get you a list of other articles and books that share the same subject heading.

Next Steps

» You will complete a few practice activities related to what you've just learned.

» Then, it's on to Lesson 3, Managing Information Overload.

» At the end of Module 1, you'll take an assessment.