This is a Brief Online Learning Tutorial (or BOLT) brought to you by the LISTEN project, a HRSA funded project focusing on improving the information literacy competencies of nursing students and professional nurses.
You may find that you need additional information available in an online database. It can be confusing and overwhelming to locate what you need quickly and effectively. Where do you go? How do you search? This BOLT will show you briefly about basics on database searching.
Each database has its own indexing scheme. For example, MEDLINE uses Medical Subject Headings also called MeSH to index articles. CINAHL uses MeSH as base but supplemented with additional terms related to nursing and allied health, which is called CINAHL subject headings. They are control vocabularies.

Both MeSH and CINAHL’s Subject Heading List are hierarchical authority file lists. In MEDLINE it is called Tree Structure while in CINAHL it is called Tree View. Based on the subject terms, subject specialists go over each article completely and then assign terms to the record that describe as specifically as possible the content of the article.
There are two kinds of searches in MEDLINE and CINAHL. The first type is called Focus search or Major Concept search or Major Topic search, which means it searches for those documents in which your subject heading is considered the major point of the article. Focus search will reduce your search results.

Another type of search is called Explode search, which includes MeSH terms or CINAHL subject headings found below your search term in the MeSH Tree Structure or CINAHL Tree View. Explode search will increase your search results.
Another database searching basic technique is to understand the Boolean Operators, also called search operators. Boolean operators define the logical relationships between search terms. The most popular Boolean operators are AND, OR, and NOT. They can be applied to most databases such as PubMed/Medline, CINAHL, EMBASE, etc., and Internet search engines such as Google and Yahoo.

When using AND to combine two search terms, the search only retrieves the overlap documents. In this case, a search for Diabetes and Pregnancy retrieves documents about diabetes and pregnancy. Both terms must appear in the documents. Therefore, AND reduces the search results.

OR is another popular search operator. When using OR to combine more than two search terms, the search will retrieve documents that contain either of the search terms. In this case, the search retrieves documents containing either headache or migraine. This operator increases the search results. OR is usually used to combine synonyms or similar terms.

NOT is used to exclude or remove search terms from the search. In this case, the search retrieves documents about music but will not include documents talking about jazz.
The effective search for relevant information always starts with a good search strategy. Here are some questions to ask when you need to search a database. What search terms should be in your search question? What database(s) are you going to use to conduct the search? Are you going to use subject terms or keywords to conduct your search? Do you need to explode the term or do you only need a few articles? Are you going to use Boolean operators to combine the search? Do you need to limit your search to things such as publication date, language, population, age group?
For example, if you are looking for practice guidelines in CINAHL, first search for your topic, then limit the search to Practice Guidelines from the Search Option under Publication Type.
If you are looking for systematic reviews in PubMed/Medline, go to pubmed.gov then click Clinical Queries from the left sidebar, and search your topic using Systematic Reviews search box.
Continue to visit the LISTEN website, at listenuphealth.org, for more helpful tips on using technology and seeking, evaluating, and applying information in nursing to support evidence-based nursing practice.
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