This is a Brief Online Learning Tutorial (or BOLT) brought to you by the LISTEN project, a HRSA funded project focused on improving the information literacy competencies of nursing students and professional nurses.
Google has become a household name and continues to be utilized in the clinical setting despite numerous unreliable “hits” or sources. Google may be easy to search, but you should always question and evaluate the source. Did you know there was a specialized Google resource for scholars, researchers, and nurses? This BOLT will provide an overview of how to utilize Google Scholar for research.
Google Scholar is a Google search engine that focuses on scholarly literature. Google Scholar is a citation index. To access Google Scholar, go to scholar.google.com
Google Scholar provides a simple way to broadly search for scholarly information. It offers one place where you can search across many disciplines and sources. The Google Scholar content includes peer-reviewed articles, theses and books. Formats may include abstracts and full texts from academic publishers, professional societies, preprint repositories, university Web sites, and other scholarly organizations. Google Scholar also searches for institutional repositories.
Google Scholar is a citation index. The citation includes: the article title (which links to the article abstract or full text if available); the author or author’s journal where the article was published; the publication year and publisher; and, a few sentences from the article abstract (showing your search term in bold letters). The citation also includes how many times the article was cited in similar articles, and how many of the search results provide multiple versions of the article (if any).
Why Do You Need to Use Google Scholar?

✓ A supplement to scholarly databases
✓ Retrieve full text articles quickly when available
✓ Access to citations from scholarly publishers
✓ Verify citations not indexed in scholarly databases
✓ Show most heavily cited articles first
✓ Find key or classic articles on a topic

Why should you use Google Scholar? You should use Google Scholar as a supplement, especially when you haven’t found needed information in scholarly databases such as PubMed and CINAHL. Google Scholar indexes full text articles so you can get free full text articles quickly if they are available on the Internet. Google Scholar works with academic publishers to gain access to some materials that wouldn't ordinarily be accessible to search spiders, where normally they are locked behind subscription barriers. When it comes to hard-to-verify citations, a Google Scholar search might retrieve the citation or abstract for you. Another nice feature about Google Scholar is that you can see how many times an article was cited and the link to cited references. This is especially helpful when you don’t have access to citation databases such as Scopus or Web of Science. Due to Google Scholar’s emphasis on citations, it can be an excellent resource for finding key or classic articles on a topic.
Searching Google Scholar is like searching Google. The search can return large numbers of results. Learning a few tips and tricks is always helpful in getting what you want. Start your search with the Advanced Search page, using the learn advanced search tips link, and set limits to your subject areas so you can get focused results. You can also limit the search to specify publication source, or publication date from the search options on the Advanced Search page.
Use simple key words instead of a long sentence to do a search. You do not have to worry about using the Boolean Operator AND between your search terms. Simply summarize your question into key words and use the key words to do the search. For example, if you want to find articles about new medications used in chemotherapy for prostate cancer, just enter “chemotherapy prostate cancer” in the search box. Use quotation marks to force Google Scholar to do a phrase search. For example, “Antidepressant medication use and breast cancer risk”, Google Scholar will automatically find resources that mention your search phrase. Google Scholar’s citation index uses a ranking algorithm (tracking number of times an article was cited by other articles), helping identify articles that are considered more reputable. Google Scholar retrieves the most heavily cited articles first that it has identified as relevant to your search terms. Relative to the ranking algorithm, normally there is no need to go to the 2nd page of the search results. Since Google Scholar puts the most cited references at the top, chances are that older, frequently cited articles would appear in the first page. If you need more recent publications, use the recent articles link to get the latest articles.
You can also do author search and title search in Google Scholar. For example, to search for articles published by Nancy Kreiger just type Author: last name or initial and last name. To search a typical word that only appears in documents’ titles, using Intitle:thyroid, returns results that include thyroid in the documents’ titles. Intitle:“heart disease” returns results that include heart disease as a phrase in the documents’ titles.
Another option allows you to put in search terms using the ‘all in title’ command. For example, breast cancer thermotherapy (with breast cancer in quotes) returns documents where breast cancer and thermotherapy appear in the titles. You can also specify that Google Scholar search for materials from a particular site (such as searching for articles about heart disease published in JAMA). You can also specify a publication date range for the search. These examples are not all of the search tips and commands used in Google Scholar only practice makes perfect. The more you use the search engine, the better you may understand its features and weakness; and, the more you will know when and how to use it for your research purposes.
Knowing the limits of what Google Scholar can do will help you make smart decisions about when to use it for your research. You need to be aware that with Google Scholar, search results will include large numbers of resources, including some with irrelevant information; many citations will not have access to full text articles due to license restrictions; search results frequently include dead links. You may also find duplicate records because resources appear in different places; and, Google Scholar does not have a way to save search results like other scholarly databases.
Don’t depend on searching Google Scholar as your only information source, use it as a supplement to scholarly databases. If you want to get the most out of Google Scholar, learn about its advanced searching tricks and commands. When there is no link to a citation, check your library’s catalog to see whether the library has access to the entire article. Use Google Scholar wisely.
Continue to visit the LISTEN website, at listenuphealth.org, for other helpful tips about using technology; and, seeking, evaluating, and applying information in nursing to support evidence-based nursing practice.
Developed by Lin Wu, MLIS, AHIP
LISTEN Grant Health Sciences Librarian

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