9 – Phrases, Truncation, Search history & Boolean

This slide is about generally applicable tips for searching databases, no matter what interface you’re on, so be it Ovid or something else.

The first tip though, is about phrase marks and infact Ovid will assume a phrase. If you put more than one word in the search box together, Ovid will assume you want those words to appear only as phrase in the records that get returned in your results.

Most interfaces will assume that you want all of those words but not necessarily together as a phrase, just all of them in a record. Therefore for most interfaces, if you want a phrase to be found, only a phrase, not both or all three or whatever number of words anywhere in the record, if you want the words to appear in the order which you’ve put them, put phrase marks (“ “), double quotes (“ ”), inverted commas (“ “) around them.

Another tip that we’ve talked about before when we thought about thinking about your concepts and the synonyms, with the table, earlier on, was the truncation symbol. As I said then the symbol is very commonly an asterisk (*) and it stands for zero or any number of characters.

The example here is behavio* and as we’ve mentioned before behaviour could have a number of different endings, not just because of the difference in spelling between the US [behavior] and UK English [behaviour] spellings but also you may not mind if somebody exhibited behaviour or behaviours or if something was behavioural. So rather than type out all those variants plus their different spellings, if you take it back to the common trunk of those words which is behavio and then put an asterisk at the end [behavio*] you will find, or the search will be, for any record that has the word (should it exist) behavio but also any word that starts with behavio.

Another useful function that abstracting and indexing (A&I) database interfaces have, is a “Search History” function. This lets you do separate searches and then combine them in ways that make sense to you, rather than having to get a search all right, at once, in one box.

It allows you search each concept separately, for example, and then put them together. This can help you…

…the one, it might let you see which is your limiting set, which is your limiting concept. If a particular way of searching on a topic only brings back a very small number of records, if you start looking for that concept and something else to read about in the same paper, the number [of results] is only going to get smaller. If you know what your limiting concept is, that can help you decide whether you should be expecting any more records. You may be happy with a smaller number of records if you know a particular concept is only ever going to bring back, by itself, a small number of records.
But it may also help you to identify which concept to think more about. Which one you may want to broaden out or loosen up a bit. Which could do with having more synonyms added?

Another advantage of thinking of things organically, having in one concept at a time, is that you can add synonyms to a particular concept as you come across them. So you might do a search, read some articles or abstracts and see that there might be another way of finding a particular concept by using a different search term. You could do a search using that search term and then combine it with the concept to which it belongs in the Search History and then put that newly augmented search set together with others in the Search History to get down to articles on a particular topic which mention all of your concepts.

And this will hopefully become a bit clearer in the next slide.

The other thing the Search History helps you do is not have to worry about how a search will be interpreted. So, you could put everything into one search box. You could have all your concepts and all the synonyms for those concepts, but unless you put brackets around your synonyms, the search the interface will go away and do, isn’t necessarily the one you were expecting.

So in the example there [on the slide] if you were looking for geriatric or elderly and mobile in some way or exercise, you know you want any mention of geriatric or elderly but there also has to be some mention of mobile or exercise. If you don’t use brackets around your OR clauses, the search is usually interpreted, it will usually prioritise, AND over OR and therefore the records returned will have mention of elderly and mobile but then there will also be any record that mentions the word exercise plus any record that mentions the word geriatric, which was not your intention.

If you have those separate concepts in the search history, your OR clauses in the search history, you can AND them there as well and you know exactly what’s happening and that the search is the one you were intending.

You don’t have to use the Search History of course, you can just put your search as a one off in the box as long as you remember to put brackets ( ) around your OR clauses.

Just a wee reminder about the Boolean commands, the OR and the AND.

OR is what you use to get more results, so in the example you don’t care if there is a mention of geriatric or elderly, either of those is equally useful. So you put them together with OR and you get more results, a larger set.

AND is when you put your concepts together, you want more than one concept to appear and you get a smaller number of results.

OR for synonyms, gets you more.
AND when you put your concepts together and that will narrow it down and get you smaller set of results.