

Transcript: Google for academic research

– Some search techniques

Google knows best. Or does it?

Google does not always respect the search terms you are putting in.

Although it is a good idea to apply some of the search techniques from library literature databases to your Google search be aware that Google will not always respect your search strategy.

For example, adding in further terms to narrow down your topic is a good idea, but:

- Google will ignore terms if it thinks you do not have enough results.
- Most of the time it will tell you by noting the missing word/s underneath each result (but it doesn't always!)

Exact phrase searching is useful in Google, just as it is in library literature databases. Use double quotation marks around terms, phrases, names, or titles of documents to force the search engine to give you results with those terms directly next to each other (but note that as with everything in Google, although it works most of the time, it doesn't always work!)

As when developing a search strategy, consider alternative terms and variations on the search terms you are using such as singular and plural. Google will try to help you out here by:

- making automatic spelling corrections
- looking for both British and American spellings for you
- searching for various variations of your search terms including singular/plural versions of the word you used

Note that the asterisk * has a very different function in Google, so do not try to use this for truncation!!

The ranking is affected by which of your alternative terms you choose to use, switch to a more academic sounding synonym and the results should re-order to show more academic results nearer the top. Indeed, some results may even be missing.

Google initially achieved this by referring to an English language thesaurus but this has got more sophisticated using artificial intelligence to develop its own thesaurus. It now uses trial & error and sees what people end up clicking on. For example, it could figure out that locomotive was an alternative term for steam engine by learning from people's searches and clicks.

A recent search I did, for instance, I could see that Google was showing me variations on the term 'assessment' as I could see some results with 'assess' or 'analysis' or 'appraisal'.

You may be used to using * to truncate your search terms.

The asterisk * is used very differently by Google (because it is already truncating for you).

Google uses * to stand in for one or more words. e.g. european * policy picks up: european education policy, european health policy, european privacy policy etc.