Improving Bibliographic Database Search Results

Note: reading the help screens within a database can be very instructive and can provide specific details for search options that may improve your search results. There are many advanced and/ or specialized ways of searching each particular database.

If your database search produces:

No Citations

- Check for misspellings
- Check for terms that are unlikely to be used by an author
- Check for terms that are too specific
- Check for incorrect or missing field terms/ limiters
- Ask yourself, if you can expect to find articles with these terms or these combination of terms in the title, abstract, or subject headings
- Check your assumptions (e.g. are you in the right database)
- Also try techniques listed under "too few records"

Too Few Citations

- Drop the use of multi-word phrases and use AND between words instead
- Decrease the use of the AND operator or the number of concepts searched
- Increase the number of synonyms or alternatives for a term (combined with OR)
- Use the scientific name and the common name (e.g. "wolves or canis lupus"; "prozac or fluoxetine")
- Use variant spellings (i.e. British variants - e.g. "color or colour"; "behavior or behaviour", etc.)
- Use truncation (*) at the appropriate place in terms to pick up variant endings (e.g. ecolog*)
- Use a search term appropriate to the database you're searching (subject headings/ descriptors)
- Use a broader search term; use a thesaurus for the database or subject
- Search earlier or more years of the database
- Try searching a different database

Too Many Citations

- Decrease the number of synonyms by choosing the most specific subject headings or the most significant/relevant keyword
- Increase the number of search concepts (with AND)
- Do not search by full text (i.e. change the field limiter to keyword)
- Limit your search by field, e.g. restrict your search to terms found only in the title of the article
- Limit your search (to peer reviewed/ refereed articles, or to articles in english, etc.)
- Limit your search by time period to the last five years
- Exclude less relevant concepts with NOT