Searching for articles on a specific topic can be daunting, especially for a busy clinician who doesn’t do it every day. These strategies will help you search library databases, including those in PTNow ArticleSearch, more effectively and efficiently. Work your way through all 10 tips in this 2-part post to maximize your searching potential.

Note: This post is adapted from the 2014 Combined Sections Meeting session, "Ask-A-Librarian: Better Searching in 2 Hours or Less," presented by Gini Blodgett, MSLS, lead information resources specialist in the Evidence-Based Resources Department at APTA.

#1: Know Your Databases
Every literature database contains content on predefined subjects and sources of information. For each database you use, you need to know:

- What disciplines it covers (eg, medical, technology, sports)
- What types of publications it contains (eg, scholarly, trade, popular magazines)
- What kinds of documents it stores (eg, journal articles, books, chapters, magazines, dissertations, images)
- The time periods available (eg, 5, 10, 20 years)
- Most important, the format available (eg, citation, citation/abstract, structured abstract, full text) and/or how to obtain full text

For example, the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews (one of the databases in the Cochrane Library) covers health care, contains systematic reviews and protocols, includes scholarly research, provides only current reviews (no archive of outdated material), and is completely full text.

#2: Place Quotation Marks Around Phrases in Your Search String
Looking for a specific phrase or name? Place quotation marks (" " ) around the phrase you want searched: (Note: quotation marks around phrases in PubMed is not typically recommended because it turns off “automatic term mapping,” which tries to match your keyword/phrase to one of PubMed’s standardized subject terms)

"pediatric physical therapy"
"Helen Hislop"

You will search with more precision, and your results will contain articles with the words in the exact order you specified.

#3: Instead of Sentences, Use "AND"
Instead of sentences, use AND, in capital letters, to combine keywords and phrases:

  torticollis AND "physical therapy" AND infant
Unlike Google and some other search engines, if you type an entire sentence in your search field, like "strength training improves knee flexion for adolescent athletes with knee instability," you won't get the results you're looking for.

Instead, pick out the key phrases, words, and concepts, using the PICO format:

Patient + Intervention + Comparison + Outcome

For the knee flexion example, use a search string similar to:

adolescent AND "strength training" AND "increased knee flexion"

If you type several words without the AND in between, some databases will assume you want only results where those words are adjacent to each other. To tell the database what you want—use AND.

#4: To Expand Your Results, Use "OR"

Use OR, in capital letters, to expand your search results.

The searching operator OR lets you expand your search results by locating all of the records that contain at least one of the specified keywords or subject terms. This method works well with synonyms. For example:

elderly OR aged

When using the OR operator and other search terms, use a set of parentheses to group your terms.

(elderly OR aged OR "older adults") AND fatigue AND exercise

#5: Use Truncation to Pull Up All Word Variations of Your Topic

Place the truncation symbol (usually an asterisk) at the last most common letter:

iontophore* (for iontophore, iontophoretic, iontophoresis, etc)
physiotherap* (for physiotherapy, physiotherapist, physiotherapists, etc)

If you shorten the root word too much, you may bring up irrelevant items. In our "physiotherapy" example above, truncating the word at the "o" would produce results for physiotherapy, but also for physiology, physiopathology, and physiological, among others.

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