Keyword Search Strategies for Library Databases

Keywords are any important words or phrases describing your topic. Keyword searches work in all *library databases* (for articles) and the *Library Catalog* (for books).

Step 1: Define your topic. HINT: Try to think of specific aspects of your topic that interest you. Broad, general topics are much harder to research and write about than small, focused. topics.

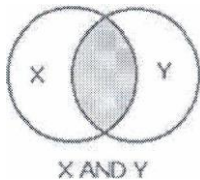> ***Broad Topic:*** the civil rights movement
> ***Specific Topics:*** Montgomery bus boycott, freedom rides, Greensboro Four

Step 2: Think of keywords to describe each concept involved in your topic. Think of more than one, in case your first choice does not work.
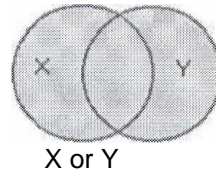
Sample topic: *Does the death penalty unfairly target minorities?*

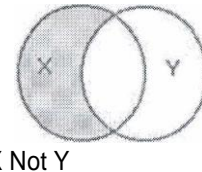|	**Concept 1:** *death penalty*	**Concept 2:** *unfairly target minorities*	
Alternative terms:	*capital punishment*	*discrimination*	*ethnic groups*
	execution	*racism*	*African American*
		prejudice	*Hispanic* etc.

Step 3: Create a search statement. Use Boolean operators to tell the computer whether you want to find all the words, any of the words, or if you want to exclude a word from your results. Here's a visual example of how this works:

X AND Y

X or Y

X Not Y

(results have both terms)
zoos *and animal welfare*

(results have either term)
men or males

(results have X but not Y)
titanic not movie

AND is the most important, because it helps you narrow your search. A good way to start a search: Choose your best keywords, then link them together with **AND**.
> *Sample search using our keywords form step* 2: **death penalty and racism**

Other search tricks: Enclose exact phrases in quotation marks: **"death penalty"**
> Use a truncation symbol (usually *) to get multiple forms of a word. Example: **rac*** will retrieve **race, racial, rac**ism - but also racy, rack, and raceme.

STEP 4: Evaluate your results. Be choosy? An article or book can contain all your keywords but still not be useful.

If you get no results or too few results:
> Check your spelling. Misspelled words are a common search problem.
> Avoid typing long phrases or questions. Use only the most important words, and always separate them with **and**.
> Choose different keywords for your search.
>> For example, if your search was: **death penalty and racism**
>> Try these instead: **capital punishment and racism**
>>   **death penalty and discrimination**

If you have any questions, please ask for assistance or call 881-2266