Basics of Online Research

No one has ever come up with a foolproof way of searching online databases. Understanding the basics of how computers search will help you construct productive searches.

Boolean Logic

Most computer search engines are based on boolean logic. This is a way of showing relationships between terms. Boolean logic uses the following:

A or B
using the connector “or” means everything in A, everything in B, everything in both A and B. The “or” operator is most effective when used to look for related terms such as “chocolate” or “caramel.”

A and B
using the connector “and” means everything in the intersection of A and B. The “and” operator is most effective used to limit your search. For example “chocolate” and “caramel”.

B not A
using the connector “not” means everything in B except what overlaps with A. This connector must be used with care since you will lose everything that is in the overlap of A and B. A search such as “caramel” not “chocolate” would eliminate “chocolate” and “chocolate caramel.”

Searching as an Inverted Pyramid

Successful searches begin broad and end narrow, visualized as an inverted pyramid. Although it may take longer, you will have a better understanding of how each limit and changing variable affects your search.