Search Strategies Using ProQuest

ProQuest is one of the primary database aggregators available to USSA students using the library webpage. ProQuest is actually a digital platform that makes 32 different databases available to the user.

For teaching purposes, let’s use the AB/INFORM Complete database. When you go the USSA website you click on the “library resources” link. You will be asked to sign in. When you sign in you will see a listing of library resources available to eligible users. When you click on ProQuest you will see a page with the list of available databases. Select the top one.

You will be taken to the Basic Search page. To obtain better results, click on the “Advanced Search” link. This database generally does not show search results for books. You can define your search by record type by using the drop-down box on the right side of the screen. You type your search term on the left side in the search box and then click on the arrow on the right side and highlight the type of search you want to do. Examples of the type of search you can complete are for author, title, or person.

You can narrow your search by using the second and third search boxes on the page. This allows you to perform a Boolean search. Boolean searches seek to connect terms using the connector terms “and”, “or”, and “not”. When you search for documents containing both “dog” and “cat” you will perform a narrower search than if you search using either of those two terms individually.

You will note a drop-down box located by the connector term “and”. Click on the box and you will see that you can substitute other Boolean connectors as part of your search. The word “or” will give you a broader set of results. The word “not” is used in a search that would read “A and B not C.” This would allow you to narrow your search somewhat. The last term you see is to be used when using search terms that might be found as a prefix in a longer term.

A search can also be limited to documents produced within a certain timeframe. Another option is to limit searches to scholarly journals only. These are journals that are peer-reviewed by expert scholars in the particular subject area, and thus will be more academically rigorous in organization and tone.

Finally, a search can be performed using additional ProQuest databases if desired. This approach might be useful when everything else tried has not produced many results. You can also click on the “more search options” link in the lower left corner for several more tools that will allow you to refocus a search.

Let’s conduct a simple search as an example. On the first line, type “sports law” in the search box. Click on the arrow to the right of the next box and highlight “Organization”. You will find that this search produces no results.
Take out the word “law” in the top box. Type it in the second box in place of “MLS” and then type “MLS” in the third box. You will still find nothing. Now replace “MLS” in the third box with “soccer”. This last search produces 76 results.

The point of this exercise is not to evaluate the quality of the results found. By replacing “MLS”, which is the acronym for Major League Soccer, with the much broader generic term “soccer,” the results went from 0 to 76. If you change the type of search for the term in the third box from “citations and abstract” to “subject” you find that you will get 44 instead of 76 results. This illustrates not only that it important to select the search terms you use carefully, but also that the type of record you are searching for is important in determining how successful a search will be.

All of the major databases are searched in a similar manner. Database searching is an art, not a science. As a user becomes more comfortable doing these searches he or she learns how to gauge the effectiveness of search terms based on the number of records found. Many searches that will be done will return thousands of records. A user can’t possibly review that many records.

There are two online searches that will produce good results for articles that are freely available online for anyone interested in learning more about digital searching. One is “Boolean search connectors” and the other is “Boolean search truncation symbols.” I suggest that any user just starting out to learn the art of online searching “Google” (or use whatever search engine you prefer) those terms and read a couple of the resulting articles.

Don’t forget that there is also a lot of good quality material available on the internet. More and more, people and institutions are making material freely available online.

For additional assistance, you may call the library or send an email to library@ussa.edu.