TIPS for Searching a Database

DATABASE ORGANIZATION
Databases are designed to retrieve information in two basic ways: full text or by fields (subject terms or issues or tags).

A **full text** search looks for the search terms anywhere in the document. Using "document and design" as keywords will pull up information on two very different concepts:
- I will be teaching a course on *document design* in the spring.
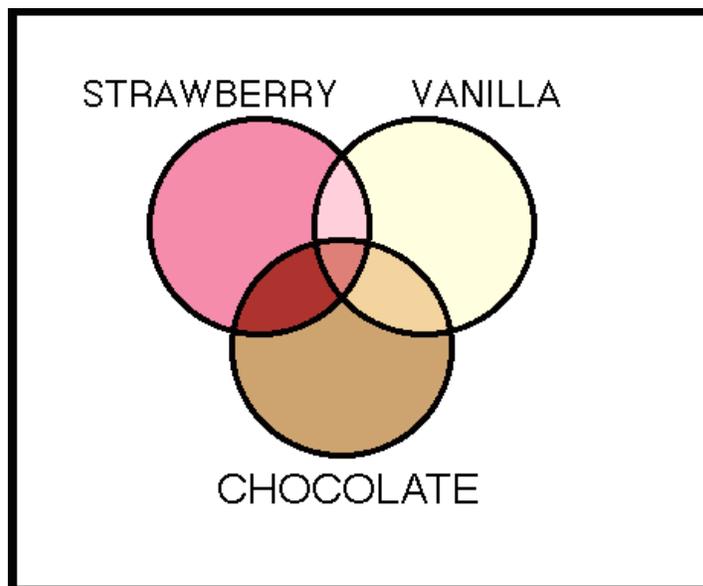- I will *document* the *design* meeting and send you the minutes.

A search by **subject or issues or tags** will only produce articles that have been tagged with those exact terms.

BOOLEAN LOGIC
Databases use Boolean logic in order to find information. The key terms in Boolean logic are
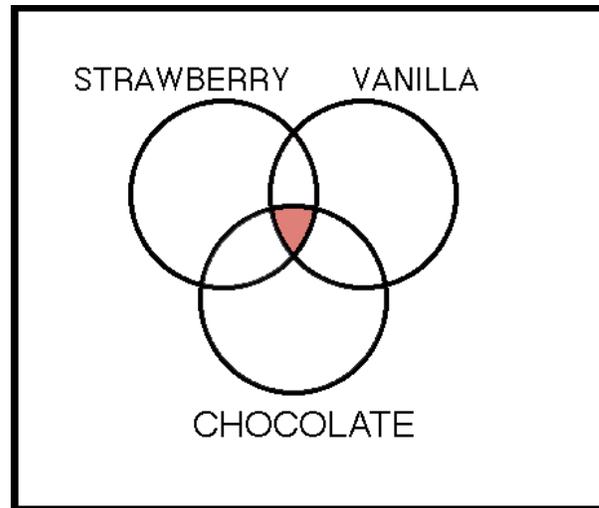AND, OR and NOT

OR = the broadest search[1]
strawberry OR vanilla OR chocolate finds any article containing one, two or all three of the words
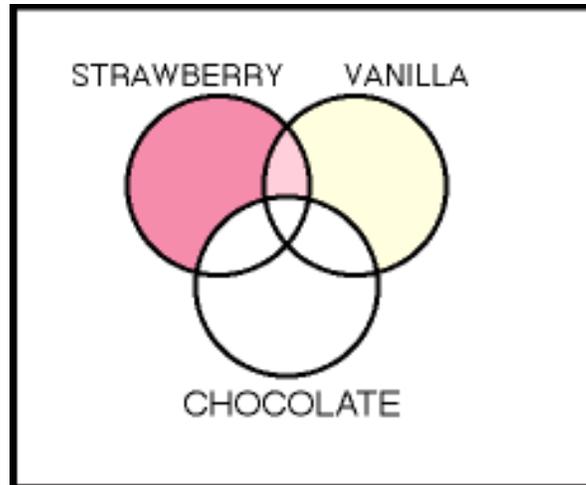
AND = more limiting as all terms must be present in a single article
  strawberry AND vanilla AND chocolate locates only articles containing all three terms

NOT is the most limiting
  strawberry AND vanilla NOT chocolate will leave chocolate lovers very disappointed

Google defaults to AND
  mu shu pork recipe = mu + shu + pork + recipe = dinner!

Truncation is a searchable shortened form of a word. This means you can take short cuts. Instead of writing out **adolescents OR adolescence**, you can use the truncated term **adolescen***. Unfortunately, databases are not consistent with truncation symbols, so in one you might have to use **adolescen***, but in another **adolescen?**, and in yet another, just **adolescen** (if truncation is automatic).

Plurals: Many databases are smart enough to pick up regular plurals without adding truncation, such as school retrieving both school and schools, but not all do, and they would be even less likely to be designed so that child would retrieve both child and children, without also retrieving childbirth, childhood, and childishness.

Wild card characters are useful because of alternate spellings and other quirks in the English language. Just as British and Canadian ice cream comes in **flavours**, not **flavors**, a British or Canadian study of college students may use the term **behaviour**, instead of **behavior**. Searching with a wild card can help. With the term **behavio?r**, both **behaviour** and **behavior** may be searched together. The most common use of wild cards is because of women. **Wom*n** should pick up both **women** and **woman**. Once again, because databases are not consistent with the characters they use, as the examples indicate, you will have to use different wildcard characters in different databases. It is best to check the help screens to see the exact symbols and rules.

LEARN MORE:
- "Effective Search Techniques" http://lib.skidmore.edu/library/index.php/effective-search-techniques
- Wikipedia – more than you ever wanted to know about Boolean Logic – http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boolean_logic
- George Boole

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1. http://www.ithacalibrary.com/sp/subjects/boolean