

This guide gives a brief overview of the main tools and techniques you will need to use when constructing a search on an electronic database.

CHOOSING A DATABASE

- Identify the type of information you need (case law, legislation, procedure?)
- Know the content of each legal database. (See the BPTC manual *Opinion Writing and Case Preparation*, Chapter 5).
- Be aware of dates – many databases only contain information from the 1980s onwards.
- How up to date is the database content? - update your findings. See *Library Guide 11. Updating legal sources*.

SELECTING KEYWORDS

Identify words that define the problem you are researching (eg: *What is the close season for snipe?*)

- words offered to you by the problem itself (*shooting, snipe*)
- alternatives to those words (*shoot, bird, wild bird*)
- concepts behind those words (*game, close season, licensing*)

Case Sensitive?

When typing your keywords into a legal database, be aware that some databases retrieve different results if you enter your keywords entirely in capital letters. Most of the larger databases (Westlaw, Lawtel, LexisNexis) are NOT case-sensitive but it is good practice to input your keywords in lowercase and the Boolean operators AND, OR and NOT in *capitals*.

CONSTRUCTING A SEARCH

- AND, OR and NOT ('Connectors' or 'Boolean operators')

After selecting your keywords, combine them using the connectors AND, OR and NOT...

Search phrase (eg)	...will find records containing...	Use it to...	Notes
<i>shoot AND snipe</i>	...records containing the words <i>shoot</i> and <i>snipe</i>	...combine keywords, narrowing the search	Many databases assume an AND if no connector is entered. (eg: <i>close season</i> will find <i>close AND season</i> rather than the <u>phrase</u> <i>close season</i>).
<i>snipe OR game OR bird</i>	...records containing the words <i>snipe</i> or <i>bird</i> or <i>game</i>	...search for alternative keywords, widening the search	Useful for searching for alternative concepts (eg: <i>copyright OR patents OR designs OR intellectual property</i>).
<i>snipe NOT bird</i>	...records containing the word <i>snipe</i> provided it does <u>not</u> contain the word <i>bird</i>	...exclude keywords, narrowing the search	Use rarely and with caution as it excludes records that may actually prove relevant.
() eg: <i>shoot AND (snipe OR bird OR game)</i>	... the words <i>shoot AND snipe</i> <i>shoot AND bird</i> <i>shoot AND game</i>	... to group more complex phrases thereby narrowing the search.	Brackets can be used in conjunction with the connectors AND, OR and NOT, to group more complex phrases and refine the search even further.

- **Wild card characters, truncation and proximity searching**

Various “tools” are available that allow the user to find different permutations of a word ending, to search for variations on spelling or to search for a specific combination of keywords. The most common of these are given in the table below...

Search phrase (eg)	...will find records containing...	Use it to...	Notes
Wildcards & Truncation			
<i>licen!</i>	...the words <i>licence, licensing, licensed, licensee</i> etc.	...replace one or more letters, searching for alternative keywords, widening the search	Particularly useful for obtaining plurals to words (though some databases such as Westlaw and Lexis, do this automatically). Use ! on Westlaw and LN Butterworths
<i>wom*n</i>	...the words <i>woman</i> or <i>women</i>	...search for alternative keywords, widening the search	Allows for variations on a word, uncertain spelling (eg: UK vs US English) and could be used to replace a hyphen in the text. eg: <i>self?incrimination</i>
Phrases			
<i>“third party”</i>	... the <i>phrase</i> <i>third party</i>	...search for a phrase narrowing the search	Searches for records where two or more keywords appear together; i.e. a phrase.
<i>“unfair! dismissal!”</i>	...the phrase <i>unfair dismissal</i> and/or <i>unfairly dismissed</i>	...search for variations of a phrase	Combine asterisk wildcard and double quotation marks
Proximity searching			
W/n eg: <i>driving</i> W/10 <i>alcohol</i>	...the phrase <i>driving</i> within <i>n</i> words of the word <i>alcohol</i>	...search for words and phrases within close proximity to each other, thereby narrowing the search.	Proximity searching allows the user to define how close words and phrases can be within the database record. Particularly useful for full text databases where one keyword may appear at the beginning of the record and the other, in an entirely different context, right at the end.

NB: Please note that these “tools” vary slightly from database to database. Lawtel uses * instead of ! as a wildcard for truncation. Similarly, Lexis and Westlaw support proximity searching (W/n) but Lawtel does not.

SEARCH TIPS

- **Fields:** if you retrieve too many results searching the full text, try **narrowing** your search by entering your keywords into a specific field (eg: *catchwords* field for case law)
- **Hyphenated words:** databases may treat a hyphen as a space or a character. Use an OR to ensure you retrieve all variations. eg: *trademarks* OR *trade marks* OR *trade-marks*
- **‘Stop’ words:** most databases will not search for very common words such as *the, is, of* or *have*. Thus *breach of confidence* will produce an error; treat it as a *phrase* (see table above).
- **Section numbers:** when searching for a section of an Act, use a section field if possible. If you must search the full text, avoid the word ‘section’ or the abbreviation, ‘s.’ Input the section number alone or use *proximity searching* (see table above) eg: *employment w/4 1998 w/15 7* to find s.7 of the Employment Act 1998.
- **Searching your results:** press CTRL and F to search for a word or phrase on a page of results.