Some Tips for Using Databases

Are you drowning?! Databases have a lot of good material to help you with your assignments and research papers-- sometimes it seems like too much!

Here are some tips for smoother sailing through your research process.

1. When searching for a phrase, enclose the entire phrase in quotation marks. For example, if you are searching for items about juvenile justice, type “juvenile justice”. Otherwise, you will get results about juveniles and results about justice, but you may not get results about the topic juvenile justice.

2. If you are having difficulty finding articles about your topic, try looking into the database’s thesaurus, or official word list, for terms to search with. Words listed in the thesaurus are the terms the database uses to categorize articles, and may not be exactly the same words you are using to find articles. For example, you may be searching for “cats”, but the database calls them “felines” instead.

3. Use the filters in the database search screen to limit your search options. Filters are checkboxes or drop-down boxes or link options that help you to narrow or focus your choices. Some useful filters are checkboxes for full-text only or for academic (also called scholarly or peer-reviewed) articles, drop-down boxes for date range choice, or subject category or subcategory links.

4. If you are getting a lot of results on your topic but they don’t seem to be focusing on the point you have in mind, try limiting your search to abstract. An abstract is a summary of the main points of an article, and if it is mentioned in the abstract, your point should be covered in the article.

5. Check the “Help” link in the database for learning about the different features in the database and how to use them. Some databases have PowerPoint or video tutorials to show you how they work.