

# 10 THINGS THAT WILL INSTANTLY IMPROVE YOUR SEARCHES

**Guaranteed results – or your money back!**

## BEFORE YOU START

1. **\*\* MOST IMPORTANT OF ALL.** Always think about what **information** you really need before you start searching. Don't just enter the 'question' as a search. Usually your first expression of what you need is not entirely accurate – Really!
2. **\*\* Break down your search requirement into its different components** to help you structure the search. For example: <Damage> inflicted by <muntyjac deer> on <woodland> In a search these are combined with AND
3. Work out synonyms for key concepts, or alternative terms that might cover what you need, and include them with OR, then 'collect' them with brackets. For example, (*flavanol OR antioxidant*) AND (*cancer OR neoplasm*\*)
4. Think about alternative spellings, verb-noun differences, etc and deal with these with truncation symbols [commonly \*] – for example, *signal*\* takes care of signalling, signalling, signals [etc] Can be used in the middle of words as well

## SEARCHING

5. **\*\* Always use the 'Advanced search'** facility rather than a single free-text box. Helps *you* think about the search 'components' and helps the *database* search with clearer directions, without you having to enter AND or OR, or worry about collecting concepts together with brackets. Advanced search will also help you indicate that, eg, 'field' is an author surname, or that you only want key words to appear in a title
6. Databases allow you to search for each set of concepts separately and then **'build'** them via 'search history'. This may sound unnecessarily complicated, but is useful if you have ended up with a long search string with lots of ANDs and ORs. And if – or more likely *when* - you find one of the concepts could have been expressed more accurately, by building a search this way you only need to correct one set, instead of starting again
7. Think about whether you need to limit your search. Do you only want information related to plants? Do you only want paper published in the last 5 years? Databases have lists of 'filters' you can apply before you search, or within a set of results [usually these are displayed on the left of the results list]

## AFTER THE [FIRST] SEARCH – yes, you're not done yet!

8. Check what indexing terms the database has used for any reasonable matches – Had you thought of them? **Steal** them!
9. **\*\* SECOND MOST IMPORTANT THING.** Never accept the first set of hits as 'it'. Even very experienced searchers recognise the necessity of checking the results and reformulating their searches. Regard your first search as a 'test'
10. If you still cannot get what you need, try **another database**. Your old favourite default database may not always be the best for every search. You'll probably be quite shocked at how many different references different databases find. See the list on <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/eresources/index.php> [choosing your subject area]