Common Features of Most Databases

**Subject headings, topics, or descriptors** - allow users to easily locate materials on the same topics even if it is expressed using different language. Subject headings may be called different things in different databases, but they all serve basically the same purpose.

**Drop-down menus** - allow users to narrow a search by searching for terms only in specific fields rather than in the entire text. Limiting searches by title, abstract, author name, journal name, geographic location, or date can sometimes help eliminate lots of extraneous material.

**Citation tools** - will automatically convert article citations to MLA, APA, or one of several other styles. Users can then copy and paste them into a bibliography. Many databases will also automatically export citations into programs such as EndNote and Refworks.

**Reference list links** - Many databases provide direct links to some or all of the articles that appear in another article’s reference list/bibliography.

**“Cited by” links or citations** - A few databases will provide direct links to (or at least information about) articles that subsequently cite the article the user is currently looking at.

**Saving specific documents or searches** - Most databases allow users to save documents or searches for the current search session. Many allow users to set up usernames that allow them to save documents or searches indefinitely.

**Durable (or stable) links** - These direct links to specific articles allow users to return to an article with a single click. Useful for posting articles on Ctools or web sites for others to see.

**Alerts** - Many databases allow users to set up “search alerts” or “table of contents alerts” that are delivered automatically by email or RSS feed. Searches can be saved and set up to be re-run on a periodic basis to keep you informed as new items in your field are published. If you have a favorite journal, a table of contents alert will automatically send you the table of contents from that journal as soon as it is published.
**Other Search Tools**

**Summon** - A “discovery tool” that allows users to search several databases and the library catalog at the same time.

**Article Linker (360 Link)** - Allows users to link from an article citation in one database to the full text of the article in another database

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**Search Syntax Tips**

**Formulating search terms** – be as specific as possible
- Use “individualized education program,” not just “program plan”
- Use “special education pending legislation,” rather than “education law”

**Beware of words that can “confuse” the computer**
- *bass* (musical instrument) vs. *bass* (fish)
- *wind* (moving air) vs. *wind* (wind a clock)
- *Cleveland* (city) vs. *Cleveland* (president)

**AND, +** must contain both words/phrases
- special education students AND expulsion
- drop out rate AND prevention

**OR** must contain one of the words
- colleges OR universities OR higher education OR postsecondary education
- assistive technology OR adaptive technology

**NOT, -** cannot contain this word
- assistive technology NOT computer
- special education law NOT individuals with disabilities education act

**Parentheses** - Operations in parentheses happen first.
- (assistive technology OR adaptive technology) AND (special education OR alternative education)

**Quotes** - If a phrase is in quotes, the document must contain this exact phrase, not just those words in random places.
- least restrictive environment vs. “least restrictive environment”
- due process procedures vs. “due process procedures”

**Asterisk** - often used as a “wild card” or truncation symbol
- class* would also find classes, classify, classification,
- expel* would also find expels, expelled, expelling BUT NOT expulsion
The Process of Writing a Literature Review

1. Choose, explore, and focus your topic.

2. Research & collect information.

   - Take the time to **formulate a search statement** that includes all **concepts** relevant to your research, as well as **synonyms** for those concepts.
   - Do **preliminary searches** in a variety of databases to see what works best.
   - Make full use of the **features** of databases.
   - Learn the **search syntax** used in the particular database you are using.
   - Be sure to **record search terms/statements** that work well. It’s also a good idea to keep a research log.
   - **Keep track of source citations** manually or using citation management resources.

3. Work with Brain - Read articles, take notes, shape ideas, identify unifying themes and concepts.


5. Write paper, revise, proof-read, finalize bibliography.

6. Go back and start over again.

Adapted from *Literature Reviews: An Overview for Graduate Students* by North Carolina State University Libraries, [http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/tutorials/lit-review/](http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/tutorials/lit-review/)