Online Searching Concepts

Database Scope and Content – understanding what type of materials are covered by a specific database and what can be expected as results of a search. Factors include breadth of coverage (how many different subjects), depth of coverage (how inclusive), coverage dates (time period), update frequency, etc.

Search Strategy – choosing the best method of searching and combination of search terms to produce a desired result.

Controlled Vocabulary – access points are by a predetermined list of words (subject headings, descriptors, etc.). Often, controlled vocabulary uses extensive cross references and terminology hierarchies (broader, narrower and related terms). Usually there is an online and/or printed thesaurus listing vocabulary terms.

Keyword – access is by any individual word or word phrases existing in the record. Order of multiple words is usually unimportant.

Command Language Searching – searches are entered with a specified syntax.

Natural language Searching – searches are entered as questions and the system determines the best search strategy.

Relevancy Ranking – search results are ordered by a predetermined or specified ranking where the items that “best fit” the search or are “most relevant” are presented first. Special characters to identify “essential” or “important” terms may be used.

Boolean Searching – using the Boolean operators (AND, OR and NOT) to combine search terms to produce results.

AND – is a narrowing operator. All terms connected with AND must be present.
Example: cats AND dogs – results must have both terms

OR – is an expanding operator. The search results must have at least one of the terms OR’ed together.
Example: cats OR dogs – results may have either term or both

NOT – is an excluding operator. NOT is used to filter out undesired terms.
Example: cats NOT dogs – all items with CATS will show, but those with DOGS not

Implied Boolean – depending on the search engine, some systems assume an OR between search words separated by spaces and some assume an AND.

Phrase Searching – requiring the search to find a specific text string or word pattern. Word order is important. Special characters (usually quotation marks) are sometimes required to define the phrase.

Truncation (or Wild Cards)– searching for words with a root character string. A truncation character is required.
Example: librar? will find library, libraries, librarian, etc.
Some systems allow internal truncation (wom?m will return women or woman) or left truncation ( ?manship – will return all words that end with that characters string).
Truncations characters vary from system to system. Common characters are * and ?

Field Searching – narrowing a search by requiring the system to only find terms located in specified places in the record (e.g. author field, title field, abstract field, etc.).

Limiting – similar to field searching. Narrowing a search to items with particular qualifications (e.g. Limiting by publication year, location, format, etc.)

Cluster Analysis – some systems will analyze search results and divide them into groups based on additional subject terms or keyword they have in common.