Search techniques: Phrase searching and proximity searching

The following different ways of searching for phrases may be useful in improving your search strategy and can make a significant difference to your search results. Always check the database help pages before you start searching as there are several ways to deal with phrases.

Phrase searching

- When you search for a phrase such as health education, the words will not necessarily be found near each other e.g. if searching within the citation, one word may appear in the title and the other in the abstract. This is as if you had searched using the Boolean operator AND e.g. pain AND management

- If you want words to appear next to each other in an exact phrase, in that order, with no other significant words appearing in between, you must enclose the words in quotation marks, e.g. "self esteem". This applies in many research databases. This will decrease the number of results you get and make your results more relevant. However, this may have limitations e.g. “community nurse” would not find “community health nurse”

- If you do not use quotation marks, the database may search for the individual words:
  - Some databases automatically use your search terms as an exact phrase, together in the order you type them, without the need for quotation marks.

  **TIP!** Always check the database help pages before you start searching.

Adjacency searching

- This is useful if you want to look for papers where your words might appear NEAR each other rather than only right next to each other.

- You can specify how close together two words appear in your results. This can make your results more relevant as, generally, the closer two words are to each other the closer the relationship between them.

- Many databases use ADJx where x is the maximum number of additional words you will allow. This excludes words such as the, of, to, etc. Some databases use different commands, for example Nx, N/x, W/x or NEAR/x. Check the database help pages before you start searching.
Example of adjacency searching

**Pain N2 manag***

This finds pain within two words of management. As word order is disregarded, this might also find:

- Pain management
- Managing pain
- Managing severe pain
- Management of severe pain.

**Tip!** Proximity operators vary according to the database you are searching e.g.

- **N2** for Cinahl
- **N/2** for Proquest databases
- **W/2** for ScienceDirect