Whether you are looking for information using a search engine like Google, or a database system like Embase (OVID) or Web of Science Core Collection, or even the library’s search facilities there are various search commands you can use to make your search show you more relevant results without giving you lots of irrelevant information.

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What search systems normally do

Taking the library’s “Book search” as an example, if you simply type two words into the box with a space between them the system searches all the information it knows about, and then only shows you records that have BOTH your words in. You won’t be shown records that only have one of your terms in. Most search systems default to putting an AND command between words that you type into the search box with a space between them.

Finding items that cover two different topics

Underlying AND command

The underlying AND command (present automatically in most search systems) is the same as if you typed the command, AND, between them. The ‘AND’ command tells the search system to only find you records with both sport AND exercise in them. By putting the word ‘and’ into capital letters (AND) you are telling the search system that AND is a command and not a word to be searched for. This is one of 229 results that “Book search” finds from this search and you can see it has both your words in the title and close together.

This is great if you’re searching short records, like the ones in “Book search”, but not so good for full text document searching as there can be an unlimited number of words between the two you type. If you’re searching the full text of an ebook, for example, one word might be on page one and the other word much further into the book on page 221 which means the book might not be that relevant but you’ll still be told about it.

Truncation

In this example you can also see another command, called truncation. Typing the asterisk (*) symbol on the end of a set of letters tells the search system to find all records it knows about that have those letters with any ending. In this example you’ll find records that have sport, sports, sporting in.
Phrase Searching

If you want to **search for your two words as an exact phrase** you need to use the double quotes (""") search command. “Book search” only finds 11 results for the search “sport exercise” compared to the 229 it found for **sport* AND exercis***. You can see that your two words are right next to each other. This is good for finding information where you have a standard, precise phrase, “cardiac arrest” for example. You can also look for phrases that have words in that search systems usually ignore, for example “Quality of Life.”

Adjacency/proximity

The proximity command tells the search system to find records that not only have both your words in but also have the words close together, proximal to each other. This search command is less precise than exact phrase searching but not as wide as using an AND. It’s a useful command to help balance finding good material on your topic but not finding so much you can’t cope with the volume of results.

This is one of the most helpful and the trickiest commands as each search system uses different ways typing this command. AND is consistent across almost all systems but proximity is different. You don’t need to learn this command but it can be helpful. “Book search” is probably one of the most complicated. If you want to tell the search system to find items that have two words within four words of each other you type the words in “double quotes” and then put a tilda symbol ~ with the number 4 after it, like this "human anatomy"~4. Some examples of the results you are shown are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title: Essential clinical anatomy</th>
<th>Title: Seeley's essentials of anatomy &amp; physiology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author: Keith L. Moore</td>
<td>Author: Cinnamon Van Putte</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract: basic text of human clinical anatomy</td>
<td>Subject: Human Anatomy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title: Human anatomy &amp; physiology</th>
<th>Title: The anatomy of the human embryo : a scanning electron-microscopic atlas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author: Elaine N. Marieb</td>
<td>Author: Gerd Steding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Proximity in different systems

**Embase and Medline from OVID**
Use adjn  - for example forensic adj3 medicine

**PsycInfo and CINAHL from Ebsco**
Use single letter n followed by a number, for example forensic n3 medicine

**Web of Science databases like Core Collection, Biosis, CABI, Zoological Record**
Use NEAR/n for example forensic near/3 medicine

What difference does all this make?
Looking for information on human anatomy you can search “Book search” in these three different ways. Here’s how you could type it and the number of results each search finds:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AND</th>
<th>Proximity</th>
<th>Exact phrase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>897 for human AND anatomy</td>
<td>603 for &quot;human anatomy&quot;~3</td>
<td>553 for &quot;human anatomy&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finding items when there’s more than one word for a single topic

Looking for synonyms: OR (words that have the same or similar meaning)
If you want to find the best information on a topic, rather than ‘just something related’ you need to make sure your search covers all variations of your topic and the different words authors might use to describe it. You can do this using the OR command.

For example you might be interested in the dental topic of endodontics. Information might also be described as being on root canal treatment or being all about dental pulp. You can type these words and phrases into the search box with an OR between them and the system will search all the records it has and find you anything that has even just one of the words or phrases in, for example  "root canal" OR "dental pulp" OR endodontic*.

This search finds 141 items. Looking for “root canal” alone finds just 30 items, “dental pulp” finds 46 items and endodontics finds 107 items.
Confused by the search results?
Sometimes you might wonder why an item has been retrieved by the system. For example the search for endodontics finds the book:

*Vertical root fractures in dentistry* / Aviad Tamse, Igor Tsesis, Eyal Rosen, editors  e-Book | 2015

Looking at just the title and authors it’s hard to see why the search system has shown you it. However, when you expand the record within “Book search” you can see that one of the librarians has put the word endodontics in it when adding the record to the system.

Subjects:  
- Teeth -- Roots -- Wounds and injuries.  
- Endodontics.

Combining Commands
Many search systems let you combine these commands. If you look at the Library Search box you will see a link below to “More Search Options” – this is an advanced search system with a template which allows you to easily combine your commands.