Search Effectively with Phrase Searching and Wildcards

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Improve Your Search Results

Getting good results when searching databases depends a great deal on how you set up your search.

By using effective search techniques, you can find sources that are relevant to your topic and save yourself time!

In this tutorial you will learn how to enhance your searching by using two advanced search techniques: **phrase searching** and **wildcards**.



Phrase Searching vs. Keyword Searching

Many databases use **keyword searching** as their default search method. This means that results will be displayed if they contain the desired keywords no matter which order they appear in.

Phrase searching only displays results that contain the keywords in the particular order they are searched. Phrase searching is usually enabled by putting quotation marks around a set of keywords.

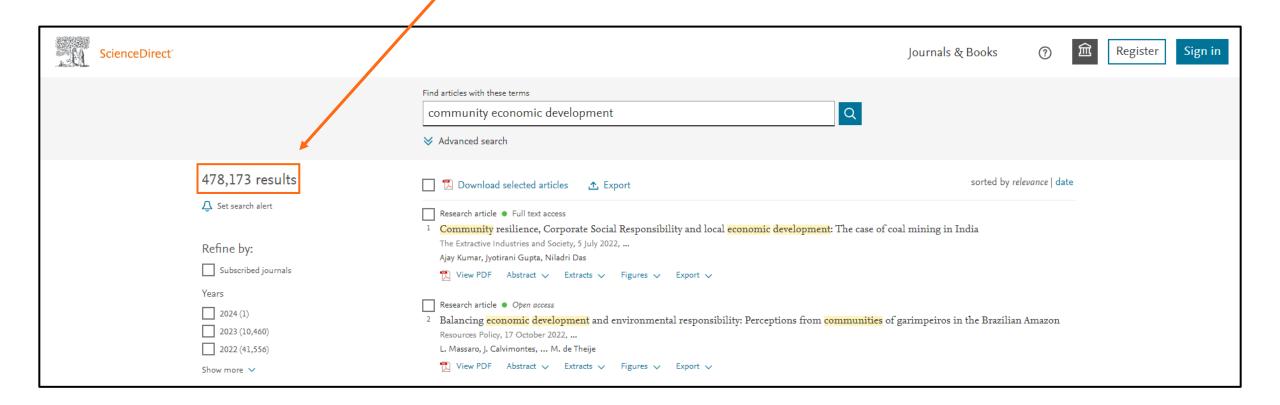


This example using the ScienceDirect database will show the results found when doing a keyword search for **community economic development**.

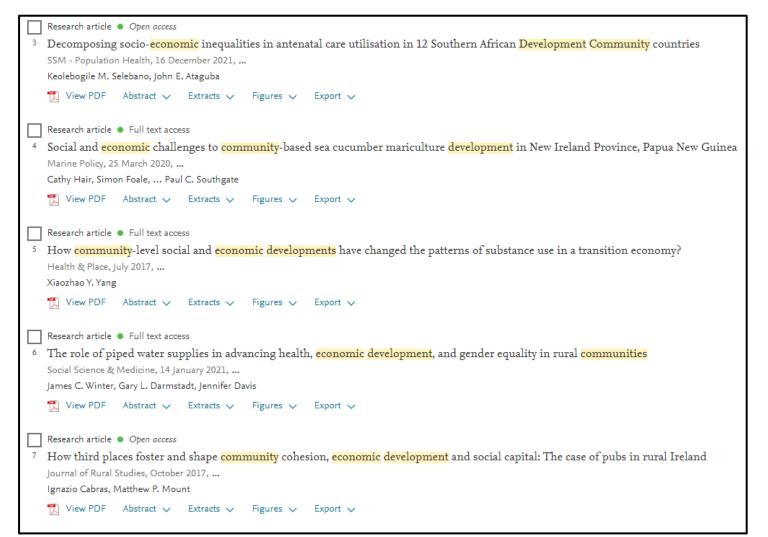
ScienceDirect		Journals & Books	?	Register Sign in
Advanced Search				
Search tips ⑦	Find articles with these terms			
	In this journal or book title	Year(s)		
	Author(s)	Author affiliation		
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This keyword search returns 478,173 results. Let's examine those results more closely.







As you can see, the search retrieved articles that have the keywords **community**, **economic**, and **development** in them.

However, the words aren't always in the proper order and the articles are not necessarily about the unique concept of **community economic development.**

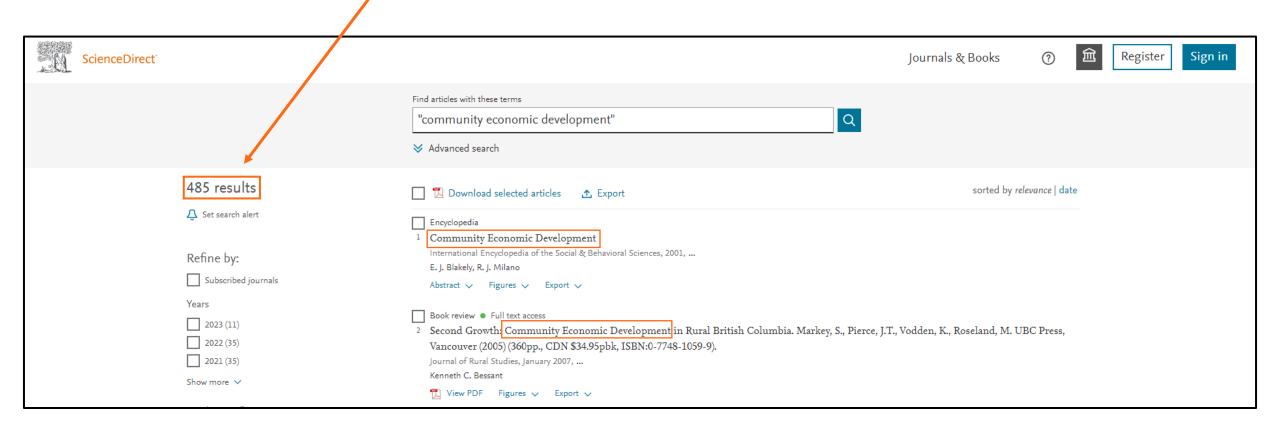


Now let's try the same search, but this time as a phrase search. To do this, place quotation marks around the keywords: "community economic development"

ScienceDirect		Journals & Books	? Î	Register Sign in
Advanced Search				
Search tips ⑦	Find articles with these terms "community economic development"			
	In this journal or book title	Year(s)		
	Author(s)	Author affiliation		
	Volume(s) Issue(s)	Page(s)		



This phrase search returns 485 results. Notice that the results are all focused on the specific topic.





Keyword and Phrase Searching Review

- The way a database treats phrase searching can have a significant effect on your search results.
- Some databases do phrase searching by default. This means if you search for a string of words, the
 database will automatically search for articles where the words appear side-by-side in the order you
 type them.
- Some databases will automatically search for words as they appear anywhere in the article, and not necessarily side-by-side.
- You can check a database's Help feature to find out if it uses phrase searching and how to do a
 phrase search.



Wildcards (Truncation)

Wildcards (sometimes called truncation) allow you to search for variations of the same word at the same time.

Wildcard or truncation symbols stand in for one or more letters in a word.

Different databases use different wildcard symbols. The most common symbols used are:

*, ?, \$, #, and !



Wildcards are useful when searching for:

Both singular and plural versions of a word:

```
Penguin* — Penguin Penguins
```

Words that start the same but end differently:

```
Farm* — Farm
Farms
Farmer
Farmers
Farming
```

Words that can be spelled differently or that you unsure of how to spell:

```
Trave*ing — Traveling TraveIling
```



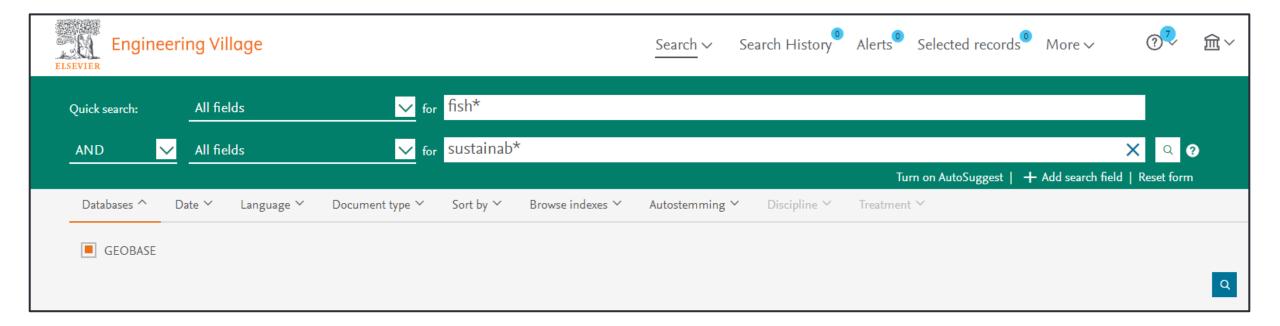
Wildcards (Truncation) Example

Let's try to find articles about sustainable fishing.

We could use the keywords **sustainable** AND **fishing** in our search, but that would mean we may miss articles that include the words **fisheries**, **sustainability**, or **fish**.

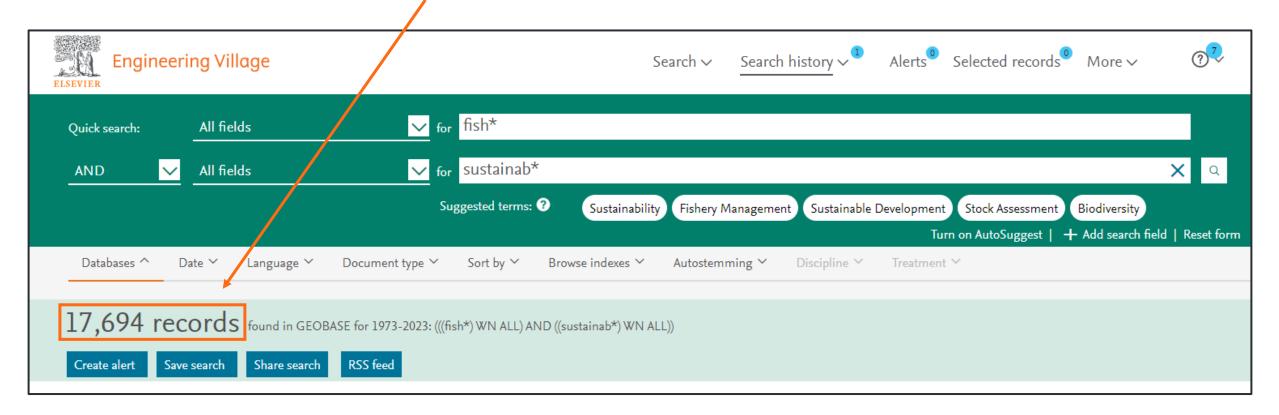


Using the GEOBASE database, the search terms **fish** and **sustainability** have been truncated to **fish*** and **sustainab***. This will allow for more of the possible keywords to be covered in one search, rather than doing multiple searches for every variation of each keyword.





As you can see, using wildcard symbols returns many results on the desired topic.





The articles listed in the search results contain different variations of the terms fishing and sustainable.





Should you truncate everything?

It may be tempting, but you should not truncate every search term.

For example, if we were searching for articles about **ants**, we may try searching for **ant***. While this will locate articles with the keywords **ant** and **ants**, you could also get articles about:

antelope, antithesis, antique, anthropology, anthrax, antimony, antebellum, anthem

Truncating a short root word (e.g., containing fewer than 4 letters) may find unwanted, irrelevant results.



Wildcards (Truncation) Review

- Some databases and search engines (such as Google) automatically truncate words that have similar spellings.
- You will need to tell some databases to truncate by using a wildcard or truncation symbol.
- Some databases do not support wildcards or truncation at all.
- Check a database's Help feature to find out:
 - if it supports wildcards
 - if it truncates automatically
 - what wildcard or truncation symbol it uses
 - how the symbols work



Have Questions?

If you have any questions, please visit or contact the Research Help desk for assistance:

Email: research@smu.ca

Phone: 902-420-5544

Text: 902-702-3057

Book a Research Help appointment

Check out the library's complete list of instructional guides for more helpful resources.





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