Boolean Search Strategy: Essential Strategy to Use with Search Engines, Catalogs, & Databases

But first, what do we mean by Boolean?

Basically, it’s how to combine your keywords for the best results, using AND, OR, and NOT.

Let’s take a look at a sample topic and build our strategies...

Strategy #1: AND
Our Topic: How Cooking Impacts Nutrients in Food
Our Keywords: Cooking, Nutrients, Food
Our 1st Strategy: cooking AND nutrients AND food

Using AND will bring back results that include ALL of these words.

What does this look like in a search engine, catalog, or database?

Let’s take a look...

Search engine search box with search terms: cooking nutrients food.

Search engine’s default settings actually assume you mean AND between the search terms.

In a single search box in a catalog or database, you typically need to add the “AND”: cooking AND nutrients AND food.

You can also find a database that may have 3 or more search boxes, each by default combined with AND. Just add each of your terms to each of the search boxes for the same search.

Lastly, you might instead have the option of putting your words in a search box that a search engine or database has specifically to search “all these words,” which does the same search.

Strategy #2: OR

Our 2nd Strategy: Using Synonyms & Related Terms with OR

Let’s take a look at one of our search terms: Nutrients. Nutrients can be a number of things, such as vitamins or minerals.

Our 2nd Strategy: nutrients or vitamins or minerals

Using OR between related terms or synonyms will bring back search results that contain ANY of these words.

In a search engine, you typically need to use OR in all capital letters.

So we’ll take our initial search in a single search box of a search engine: cooking nutrients food
And add in our related terms with OR, along with parentheses around the related terms: cooking (nutrients OR vitamins OR minerals) food

In a catalog or database with 3 or more search boxes, we again start off with our original search:

- 1st search box: cooking AND
- 2nd search box: nutrients AND
- 3rd search box: food

And we add in our related terms:

- 1st search box: cooking AND
- 2nd search box: nutrients or vitamins or minerals AND
- 3rd search box: food

Our other option might be something like this:

- All of these words: cooking food
- Any of these words: nutrients vitamins minerals

Strategy #3: NOT

Our 3rd Strategy: Getting rid of any undesirables from our list of results with NOT

Our Problem: Food, but not pet food!

Our 3rd Strategy: food NOT “pet food”

With NOT, it will exclude any words that follow it from your results.

Note some search engines use a minus sign instead.

And our 4th Strategy: using quotation marks around any 2- to 3-word phrase for an exact match—like “pet food!”

In any case, add NOT and the words that follow it to the end of your search strategy; remember, NOT will exclude anything that follows it.

So in a single search box we might have the following: cooking (nutrients OR vitamins OR minerals) food NOT “pet food”

Or with a minus sign thus: cooking (nutrients OR vitamins OR minerals) food - “pet food”

Note: Often search engines require NOT in all capital letters.

In a catalog or database with 3 or more search boxes, we again start off with our original search and add a 4th search box with NOT:

- 1st search box: cooking AND
- 2nd search box: nutrients or vitamins or minerals AND
- 3rd search box: food NOT
- 4th search box: “pet food”
Sometimes catalogs or databases may use the phrase AND NOT instead of just NOT, but the results are the same.

And that’s Boolean!

Combining your keywords for the best results!

Closing Remarks
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