Evidentia Systems
SystematicReviewTools.app

Database search syntax cheat sheet

Eight platforms, each syntax entry sourced to the vendor's own help page

Last reviewed 26 November 2026
systematicreviewtools.app/blog/database-search-syntax-cheat-sheet

Need	PubMed	Ovid	Embase.com	EBSCOhost (CINAHL)	Cochrane Library	Web of Science	Scopus	ProQuest
Phrase search	**"phrase"** e.g. "kidney allograft"	**type the words with a space** e.g. blood pressure	**'phrase' or "phrase"** e.g. 'heart attack'	**"phrase"** e.g. "human rights"	**"phrase"** e.g. "lung cancer"	**"phrase"** e.g. "soil drainage"	**"loose" or {exact}** e.g. {oyster toadfish}	**"phrase"** e.g. "healthy eating"
Truncation, unlimited	***** e.g. colo*	**$ or *** e.g. gene*	***** e.g. cat*	***** e.g. comput*	***** e.g. transplant*	***** e.g. color*	***** e.g. behav*	*** (up to 5 characters)** e.g. farm*
Truncation, limited	not documented	**$n or *n** e.g. dog$1	not documented	not documented	not documented	not documented	not documented	**[*n] (n up to 20)** e.g. nutr[*5]
Wildcard, exactly one character	not documented	**#** e.g. wom#n	**?** e.g. sulf?nyl	**?** e.g. ne?t	not documented	**?** e.g. wom?n	**?** e.g. nure?berg	not documented
Wildcard, zero or one character	not documented	**?** e.g. colo?r	**$** e.g. group$	**#** e.g. colo#r	**?** e.g. wom?n	**$** e.g. flavo$r	not documented	**?** e.g. nurse?
Proximity, any order	**"words"[field:~N]** e.g. "rationing healthcare"[Title:~2]	**ADJn (n = 1 to 99)** e.g. physician adj5 relationship	**NEAR/n** e.g. cardio* NEAR/5 system*	**Nn** e.g. tax N5 reform	**NEAR/X (NEAR = 6)** e.g. cancer near/3 lung	**NEAR/x (NEAR = 15)** e.g. Beverage NEAR/5 bottle	**W/n** e.g. Pain W/5 morphine	**NEAR/n or N/n (NEAR = 4)** e.g. nursing NEAR/3 education
Proximity, set order	**use a phrase search** e.g. "kidney allograft"	**ADJ (no number)** e.g. blood adj pressure	**NEXT/n** e.g. cancer* NEXT/4 cell*	**Wn** e.g. tax W8 reform	**NEXT** e.g. hearing NEXT aid*	not documented	**PRE/n** e.g. newborn PRE/3 screening	**PRE/n, P/n or -** e.g. nursing PRE/4 education
Title and abstract	**[tiab]** e.g. kidney allograft[tiab]	**.ti,ab.** e.g. heart.ab,ti.	**:ti,ab** e.g.† 'heart attack':ti,ab	**XB, or TI and AB** e.g. XB (foreign N3 doctors)	**:ti,ab** e.g.† cancer:ti,ab	**TI=(...) OR AB=(...)** e.g.† TI=("soil drainage") OR AB=("soil drainage")	**TITLE-ABS(...)** e.g.† TITLE-ABS("heart attack")	**ABSTRACT,TITLE(...)** e.g. ABSTRACT,TITLE(food)
Title only	**[ti]** e.g. covid-19[ti]	**.ti.** e.g. (pregnancy or birth).ti.	**:ti** e.g. heart:ti	**TI** e.g.† TI (foreign N3 doctors)	**:ti** e.g. "lung cancer":ti	**TI=** e.g.† TI=("soil drainage")	**TITLE(...)** e.g. TITLE("neuropsychological evidence")	**TI(...)** e.g. TI(food)
Keyword or text-word field	**[tw] or [ot]** e.g. kidney allograft[tw]	not documented	**:kw** e.g. aspirin:kw	not documented	**:kw** e.g. (hearing next aid*):kw	**TS=, AK=, KP=** e.g. TS = (Germany NEAR/10 "monetary union")	**KEY(...), TITLE-ABS-KEY(...)** e.g. TITLE-ABS-KEY("heart attack")	**IF(...)** e.g.† IF(food)
Subject heading, exploded	**[mh]** e.g.† neoplasms[mh]	**exp term** e.g. exp neoplasms	**/exp** e.g. 'breast cancer'/exp	**MH "heading+"** e.g. MH "arm injuries+"	**[mh term]** e.g. [mh vaccines]	not documented	not documented	not documented

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Subject heading, not exploded	**`[mh:noexp]`** e.g. `neoplasms [mh:noexp]`	not documented as unexploded	not documented as unexploded	**`MH "heading"`** e.g. `MH "tennis elbow"`	**`[mh ^term]`** e.g. `[mh ^vaccines]`	not documented	not documented as unexploded	not documented as unexploded
Boolean and precedence	**`AND OR NOT, left to right`** e.g. `vitamin c AND common cold`	**`OR AND NOT, left to right`** e.g. `((hematology and oncology) adj patient).ti`	**`AND OR NOT, no precedence`** e.g. `(A AND B) OR (C AND D)`	**`AND OR NOT, AND before OR`** e.g. `(heart OR lung) AND bypass`	**`NOT, then AND, then OR`** e.g. `(kidney OR renal) AND dialysis`	**`NEAR/x, SAME, NOT, AND, OR`** e.g. `(cadmium AND gill*) NOT Pisces`	**`AND, OR, AND NOT; order per Elsevier: OR, W/n and PRE/n, AND, AND NOT`** e.g. `(water OR vinegar OR wine) w/5 (oil OR yogurt)`	**`PRE, NEAR, AND, OR, NOT`** e.g. `cow AND (dog OR cat)`
Gotchas	• Wildcard (*) in a proximity search: the proximity is ignored. • Proximity works only in [ti], [tiab] and [ad]. • Tags, wildcards and phrases switch off term mapping.	• ADJn counts stopwords; raise n by two or three. • Turn mapping off before you truncate. • Do not repeat words either side of ADJn.	• NEAR/1 means adjacent. • No operator outranks another; parentheses first. • No leading wildcards; 3+ characters before *.	• A trailing ? is dropped; use #? at a word end. • XB is not the same as TI OR AB. • Field codes uppercase; keep search words lowercase. • Truncation does not search alternate spellings.	• No wildcards inside quotes; use NEXT. • :kw includes MeSH but does not explode it. • Lines cannot be combined with NEAR or NEXT. • Precedence: NOT, AND, OR; nest with ( ).	• No AND inside a NEAR expression. • Quotes and wildcards switch off lemmatization. • Quote NEAR when it is in a source title. • Left-hand truncation: 3+ characters; not in All Fields.	• No AND or AND NOT inside W/n or PRE/n. • No braces next to W/n or PRE/n. • No double truncation (*word*). • Elsevier pages disagree on operator order; use ( ).	• N needs a number: N/3, not N. • No leading wildcard; no lone * or ?. • EXACT cannot be combined with * or ?. • No stop-word list in ProQuest.
Vendor help, checked 26 November 2026	pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov PubMed help	site.ovid.com Ovid syntax help	elsevier.support Embase operators Embase field codes Embase search help Embase mapping help	connect.ebsco.com Classic EBSCOhost help EBSCO proximity EBSCO wildcards EBSCO Boolean EBSCO field codes EBSCO XB field EBSCO search tips CINAHL headings	cochranelibrary.com Cochrane search help	webofscience.zendesk.com WoS operators WoS search rules WoS field tags	elsevier.support Scopus advanced search Scopus search tips Scopus search guide Scopus quick reference	proquest.com ProQuest search tips ProQuest command line ProQuest field codes

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Read before you rely on it

Each cell comes from the vendor's own help page, checked on 26 November 2026. “Not documented” means the vendor pages we checked do not describe it. † marks a worked example built from the documented syntax rather than copied from the vendor page. The EBSCOhost sources are the Classic EBSCOhost help. Worked examples, gotchas with their sources, page dates and the change log are on the web page.

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