Terms and Connectors (Boolean) Searching – Introduction

This video will introduce you to terms and connectors searching, also called Boolean searching or advanced searching. For complex legal issues, terms and connectors searching often works much better than natural language searching.

You’re likely very familiar with natural language searching using Google.

Natural language will almost always retrieve something, but how relevant are your results? Terms and connectors searching is comprehensive and precise and very powerful because it lets you search terms based upon their relationship to one another.

You are already familiar with this example of a basic terms and connectors search which uses the AND connector and quotation marks to indicate the exact phrase. There are additional connectors that, used together with synonyms and tools to express word variations, will retrieve more relevant results.

This tutorial will teach you how to use terms and connectors searches to retrieve fewer, more relevant results.
On Westlaw, you can perform an advanced search in several ways. First, you can click the “advanced” button next to the search box to use the advanced search template. Or you can tell Westlaw that you want to do an advanced search by typing the word or abbreviation into the search box before your search.

Let’s talk first about terms. It’s important to use a variety of terms to express the same concept because you cannot always predict how the concept will be expressed in a statute, case opinion, treatise, or other source. So your first step will be to think of synonyms for your search terms. For help with identifying synonyms, use a thesaurus. Burton’s is a specialized thesaurus for legal terms. It’s available in print only.

You can also be sure that you capture all of the variations of a word by using a root expander or universal character as appropriate. The root expander is used at the end of a word or partial word and tells the database to search for all terms beginning with the letters before the expander.

Use the root expander carefully because it can lead to too many irrelevant results.

Universal characters replace one letter for each character, either at the end or in the middle of a word. This is an excellent search tool, but if a word you are looking for contains too many letters, it will not be retrieved.

Quotation marks are used when you want to find an exact phrase. Use caution with phrase searches because they can sometimes be too limiting. This sentence would not be retrieved by this phrase search.

In addition to “and” and “or”, some other connectors are proximity connectors. Proximity connectors let you require that your search terms appear near each other. Proximity connectors include /s for same sentence, /p for same paragraph, and /# for within a set number of words of each other.
Other useful connectors are “but not” and “atleast.”

But not lets you exclude terms from your search. This is useful when you want to exclude irrelevant terms.

The atleast command retrieves only those documents that mention your term a specified number of times. This is useful to ensure that your term is actually discussed in the document, not merely mentioned.

So, if we return to our “search and seizure” example, we can combine root expanders and a proximity connector to construct a search that would find this sentence. The next video will help you put these concepts into practice in legal research.