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The Medical Library Association Essential Guide to Becoming an Expert Searcher: Proven Techniques, Strategies, and Tips for Finding Health Information

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BOOK REVIEWS

Jankowski, Terry Ann. **The Medical Library Association Essential Guide to Becoming an Expert Searcher: Proven Techniques, Strategies, and Tips for Finding Health Information.** New York, NY: Neal-Schuman Publishers; 2008. 150 p. \$65.00. ISBN: 978-1-55570-622-3. ©

Written by Terry Ann Jankowski, AHIP, a highly respected educator and author, *The Medical Library Association Essential Guide to Becoming an Expert Searcher: Proven Techniques, Strategies, and Tips for Finding Health Information* is a step-by-step guide to database searching. The author moves systematically through all the components of an expert search process, while passing along tried-and-true strategies, tips, and bits of information to search practitioners. The book features the best practices and tested techniques for searching health information. The book speaks to novice searchers and students who may be new to the health sciences librarian profession, as well as progressive practitioners who need to sharpen their skills to provide the timely, rigorous, and contextual delivery of the best information available to support the present-day health care enterprise.

Organized in ten chapters, the book focuses primarily on bibliographic database searching and follows every key stage of the expert search process as outlined in the Medical Library Association's (MLA's) policy statement [1]. Each chapter covers one crucial element of the search process, offering practical examples, checklists, self-help exercises, and references for immediate application, practice, and skill building.

Chapter one traces the development of expert searching from the late 1960s to its more recent resurgence. Including MLA's groundbreaking 2003 policy statement, the discussion underscores the critical role that expert searchers provide in supporting clinical, administrative, academic, and research decisions. The text also presents a thoughtful discourse on searcher liability and other major challenges searchers face, such as cost issues and lack of access to back files and controlled

vocabularies in many databases. It then offers strategies for avoiding possible liability and misunderstandings.

Chapter two delves into the goals, stages, and challenges of the search interview. The author quite rightly points out that the interview should be a continuous cycle of information gathering and renegotiation, based on the client's comments and feedback at every stage of the process. Given the widespread acceptance of evidence-based medicine, the chapter appropriately covers how to structure search requests. An excellent example of a search interview is provided as well as practical examples of follow-up statements and questions that can be used during the search negotiation process. The chapter concludes with a useful discussion of post-search documentation, providing options for creating and delivering a final professional package to a client and examining arguments for and against retaining search documents.

Chapter three explains the differences between searching the web and searching databases. The limitations inherent in federated searching, such as the inability to use unique access points and search features to produce comprehensive searches, are described in detail. With a set of questions for evaluating databases compiled from the author's experience, an overview of the database evaluation process, tools, and resources provides useful background, not only for database searchers but for librarian selectors as well. Chapter four contains descriptions and uniform resource locators (URLs) for key bibliographic databases for the health and biomedical sciences. The author also ably provides the context in which these resources are used, suggesting topics and possible questions that can be answered using particular databases.

Chapter five explores the basic techniques for planning and constructing searches, which include identifying key concepts, parameters, and possible synonyms. Linking concepts to express relationships between terms and using Boolean and proximity operators are thoroughly covered. Guidelines and pro-

ocols for recommended search strategies that librarians can consult for comprehensive literature searches or for self-instruction are also covered in full. Chapter six examines how expert searchers can take advantage of a database's structure and built-in interface features to conduct successful searches. The author stresses that having a thorough knowledge of format, contents, and searchable fields of specific databases can improve the relevancy of retrieved articles and eliminate common searching mistakes. An annotated table of the MEDLINE unit record with search fields is provided, using information from the National Library of Medicine and Ovid vendors, followed by numerous search examples that illustrate ways searchers can improve retrieval by using specific qualifiers in the unit record. Cited reference searching and "related article" linking are ways searchers can take advantage of the built-in interface capabilities of a database.

Chapter seven provides an overview of subject searching, contrasting the differences that result when using natural language, a controlled vocabulary, and a combination of both. The book makes a strong case that searching either by natural language or subject descriptors alone results in only moderately successful searches, while combining these two techniques produces the most successful comprehensive searches. The use of descriptors, explosions, subheadings, and hedges is discussed, along with Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) and the indexing rules for MEDLINE. Chapter eight covers evaluating and revising search results and describes ways to increase recall for searches with too few references and precision for searches with too many references. Common search problems are presented along with strategies for correcting those problems and improving retrieval. Methods for evaluating searches—such as getting comments from fellow searchers, attaching feedback forms, and observing novice searchers—are also discussed in detail.

The final chapters nicely complement the volume of work and assist readers with developing a self-study plan and identifying resources to

improve and update their own search skills. A valuable "searcher self-evaluation checklist" is provided to help readers identify skills that they need to develop. A general overview of professional development options and opportunities for improving and maintaining skills, as well as a listing of specific resources for readers to use to find support for difficult searches or to increase search skills, are provided. The book also contains an extensive annotated bibliography of further readings for those interested in learning more about the topics, an excellent index, and a glossary of specialized database searching terms and phrases for quick reference.

The author offers up little gems of searching wisdom that are interspersed throughout the book. Interesting examples are a warning against overreliance on searching a single database for any given search request due to the complementary nature of databases and increasing interdisciplinary nature of research; the requirement of searching databases sequentially rather than through a federated search engine due to the lack of common access points and vocabularies across databases; and the use of a browse list to scan variations on author, title, page number, and so on because authors sometimes make mistakes in their bibliographies. Still another instance is the exceptional use of the specialty terms for physical therapy, dentistry, and occupational therapy that can be used both for occupations and treatments. These tiny searching treasures and the author's obvious expertise and insights on searching methods, issues, and context are invaluable and the real bonus of this book.

The book's format works well and is ideal for its purpose. The readability and browsing ease of the book is aided by numerous subdivisions in chapters. A slightly stronger editorial hand might have helped eliminate a few redundancies in the text; however, some repetition in this instructional context may be useful in reinforcing learning points and skills.

These quibbles aside, this excellent training guide will most likely become a classic textbook for courses

and should be available in all health sciences libraries. The topic of expert searching is especially timely and a key factor in the emerging roles for health sciences information professionals. This book is a must read for all practicing and aspiring information professionals, no matter their level, no matter their discipline.

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Reference

1. Role of expert searching in health sciences libraries [policy statement by the Medical Library Association adopted September 2003]. *J Med Libr Assoc.* 2005 Jan;93(1):42-4.

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