**Refined, Advanced Searching**

This example has been developed using ProQuest Research Library but the general principles can be applied to other databases. Advanced searching makes use of the full power of a database by searching the fields that are set up for each document. In this example, the fields to be searched are the person (Amy Tan) field and the subject (literary criticism) field. Note that these fields may have different names in other databases.

Field searching is more demanding than doing a basic keyword search but once it’s mastered, a searcher is able to get a smaller set of results that are likely to be closer to the exact type of information needed.

To illustrate the difference between a basic keyword search and an advanced field search, run a basic search for: Amy Tan AND literary criticism. ProQuest returns 686* results. If the results are sorted by relevancy, the articles listed at the top will most closely match all the search terms but not all of them will be at the top. If another sorting criterion (i.e., date) is the default setting, this will not be the case and the searcher will need to look further down the list for articles that meet all the search terms.

When this same search is run as an advanced search with particular fields chosen from the drop down menus, the result set will be far smaller but the articles returned will match the search terms exactly.

Since ProQuest puts articles about people into the person field, check that Amy Tan is a ‘person’ in this database by doing a search for her by choosing the person field from the drop down menu. This search returns 193 articles that are about Amy Tan.

This sample search is also for literary criticism, as a subject term. Always check to make sure that the subject term you want to use is actually a subject term in this database. ProQuest includes all subject terms in a Thesaurus so that is where a searcher needs to check before doing the search. (This tool may be called something else, such as “topics” or “subjects” or “index”, in another database but the principle is the same.) There are 131,380 articles in this database about literary criticism as a subject!

This search is really about finding articles that are literary criticism of Amy Tan’s work. On the advanced search page, enter Amy Tan in the first search box and then choose person from the dropdown menu. Enter literary criticism in the second box and choose subject from the dropdown menu. This search returns only 28 articles but all of them have the search terms entered in the appropriate fields. Also, this is a much more manageable number of items from which to choose.

A note – ten or the articles retrieved are actually reviews of books published on the two search terms. It is easy to determine the type of content which is covered in an article by looking at the
document type field. For articles that give fuller treatment of this topic, feature or commentary types would be best. All remaining 18 articles in this search are either one or the other of these types. While book reviews most likely will not have enough information to be useful as literary criticism, the books themselves might be good as additional resources. Check Mounlink, the online book catalog, to determine if they are available in our collection. If not, they may be ordered through interlibrary loan.

Databases offer many more ways in which a searcher can streamline research. Explore the possibilities. A little time invested in learning how to navigate a database will save much time later. Any of the reference librarians will assist you in this process and are available to answer your questions.

* As of this date, July 9, 2012. Additional items are added to databases on an ongoing basis.