

SEARCHING OCLC: HARDER, BETTER, FASTER

by

Al Mauler
Cataloging Department
University of Kansas
amauler@ukanvm.cc.ukans.edu

With the introduction of PRISM software, new searches on OCLC (scan, keyword), and wider availability of OCLC's services (Internet dial-up), it is necessary for us old-timers (and "new-timers") to stop for a moment to consider if our searching techniques are the most cost effective. If we develop good habits of effective searching, we can pass them on to patrons and the staff we train.

Your first determination should be whether you should start your search on OCLC. Can the information you need be found readily in another source? The obvious place to look first is in one's own institutional catalog--why "blow" a search on OCLC, simply to find out that your institution already has a catalog record for the item? Do you have quick and convenient dial-up access to the OPACs of other institutions? Are there print or micro sources (e.g., pre-'56 NUC) that are quick and convenient to use? I repeat "quick & convenient" because it is a false economy to spend a lot of staff time just to save a few cents in OCLC charges. Does your institution buy large blocks of FirstSearch searches that will retrieve what you're looking for at about the same price with more powerful searching capabilities? (Do you really need a full MARC record?)

Once you have determined that what you are looking for can only be found by searching on OCLC, then you need to keep in mind how much does a particular search cost. Searches in the Authority File are free! Scan searches in the Online Union Catalog (OLUC) are relatively cheap, but their results are limited. (To actually view an individual MARC record, you incur a regular search charge as well, and truncation may divide titles of interest into several groups based on the present or absence of subtitle information).

A numeric search (OCLC control number, LCCN or ISBN) or a derived search (3,2,2,1 [title], 4,4 [name/title], 4,3,1 [name]) is more expensive, but it will probably take you directly to the desired MARC record (numeric searches especially) or to a manageable group of records that match your search key (allowing you, for example, to view all records for various editions of a work).

A keyword search is the most expensive (although about equal to the cost of viewing a MARC record found through a scan search). The keyword search is also the most versatile, allowing you to search fields inaccessible in other searches (e.g., untraced series, publisher information, language, subjects).

Which search to start with? This is really a trick question! You should start with a search in the Authority File (AF) if your

search key will include a personal, corporate or conference name.

Fans of National Public Radio have heard of Susan Stamberg, and may even know that she has collected a volume of transcripts from "All Things Considered" entitled Every Night at Five. But how many of us would construct the derived name/title search (stam,ever) correctly? I know I thought for the longest time that her last name was "Stanberg." But a search in the Authority File would let me know that there is no "Susan Stanberg"--I should either construct my search key without a name component, or browse around in the Authority File until I found the correct form.

I won't even go into the difficulties I had with Maria Hinojosa (also of NPR--who has a book of interviews with NY gang members entitled Crews). (OK--I had a Spanish-speaker spell it out phonetically for me!) I got on this NPR kick not only because of the difficulty of picking up the correct spelling of a name from the spoken word, but also because I became very conscious of the value of checking the Authority File first when a colleague was trying to find the transcripts of the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings published with a preface by Nina Totenberg--he had just seen it in the bookstore, and that was all the information he remembered. Several problems here: is it "Tottenberg" or "Totenberg"? is the first filing word of the title "transcripts" or "Clarence" or what? The full title is: "The complete transcripts of the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings : October 11, 12, 13, 1991." Unfortunately, Nina Totenberg isn't an added entry on the record, so any name or name/title search was doomed from the start! (She could be part of a keyword search, but that's matter for another column.)

Other names are more easily resolved: how many Fs in Hugo von Hofmannsthal (author of the text of "Der Rosenkavalier") or E. T. A. Hoffmann (author of "The Nutcracker")? Should I spell out T. S. Eliot's first name (Thomas) in a name search (NO!) or C. S. Lewis' (Clive) (also NO!)? And where do I start searching for William Least Heat Moon? (And I don't mean out on the Blue Highway to PrairyErth--look under Heat Moon!) Which part of Ho Chi Minh do you search (Ho)? Some of you may remember how the authority record for Muammar Kaddafi was updated almost daily during the Libyan crisis (search by Qaddafi--because that's how he signed a letter to an American grade school girl). And if you're dying to read around in North Korean politics, be sure to check out the writings of the late Kim Il Sung (under Kim, of course).

These meanderings through the Authority File are meant to make it obvious that the most important thing you need to do is to make sure that your search is constructed of elements that are indexed in OCLC, using the conventional spelling by which they are indexed. This leads me to the easiest way of all to save money on OCLC searches--ALWAYS PROOF your search before you send it!

You will be charged for a properly-constructed search whether it retrieves any records or not. If you really screw up and send an impossible search (e.g. 4,5 [name/title] or 3,2,2,2 [title] or

4,3,2 [name])--you will be given an error message, informing you that you goofed, but it won't cost you anything in OCLC charges. But if you send the search key moon,blue (instead of heat,blue) you'll incur an OCLC search charge and have nothing to show for it.

One other thing to keep in mind is which file you're in. The files we're using in are the Online Union Catalog and the Authority File. Look in the upper right of your screen, and you'll find the symbol for the file: OL for the catalog (or bib file) and AF for the Authority File. If it isn't displayed, use the ("RET") key to display it. A derived search or numeric search will automatically move you into the correct file as it executes your search. The search key [elio,t,s will take you into the Authority File no matter which file you were in when you typed and sent it. Conversely, the search key elio,t,s will take you into the Online Union Catalog as it executes (and charges you for) a search in the bib file.

That means that, if you forget to put that bracket in front of a derived name search key, you'll be charged for a search you never intended. This can also happen with scan searches: if you forget that you are in the bib file and try to scan for a uniform title or series title authority record, it will execute a scan title search in the bib file (and charge you for it).

Next time I'll get into sending that search key and moving around in the group, truncated, or brief display that you get. I'll look at some problematic search key components and what to do about them. And we'll look at picking the most effective searching strategies based on the information you have to work with. Until then, keep your wrists straight, your forearms and thighs parallel to the floor, and take a stretch break once in a while!