

§ 2.5

Accessing Law Online: The Search Query*More Than Just Googling*

A query is an inquiry or question. You select words and phrases that are unique to your research problem to formulate a query. The query asks the online service to determine whether any case or statute has contained the same unique words and phrases. If so, there is a good chance the case you find is relevant to your research problem.

When using online research sites, there are options in the type of search query being conducted. The *Natural Language* search is similar to what *Google* or *Yahoo!* uses on a standard website. We will concentrate on the *Natural Language* type of search here. The *Terms & Connectors* search is a more specific search and will be discussed in later chapters. (*Lexis* also provides an *Easy Search* option, but that is for very simple one- or two-word searches.)

The Natural Language Search Query

- A. *Determine the key terms for your research project (Cartwheel)*

For example, suppose you were to research a matter involving liability when a child is injured on a swing at a day care center. The key terms would be:

liable daycare center premises injured child

- B. *Arrange the terms in "sentence order"*

Place the terms in the order you might envision them appearing in a sentence. This is not required, but in some cases, it may provide better results. The above words might make up the sentence "Is a daycare center liable when a child is injured on the premises?" Our list would be restructured as such:

daycare center liable child injured premises

- C. *Are there any multi-word phrases?*

The first term in the above query is *daycare center*. If that phrase is entered as-is, the website will search for the term *daycare* or the word *center* instead of both together. To avoid this problem, simply place the phrase in quotation marks. This tells the site to search for the complete phrase instead of the individual words.

"daycare center" liable child injured premises

If you prefer to enter the entire sentence as is (*Is a daycare center liable when a child is injured on the premises?*), you may do so. *Westlaw* and *Lexis* attempt to eliminate common words such as *and*, *the*, and *or*. However, the more words in your query, the greater the likelihood of irrelevant search results being delivered. Also, having a search query prepared prior to going online will limit the cost of using *Westlaw* or *Lexis* and should result in a more productive search.

Now that I have a query, what do I do with it?

Once the query is ready, you will login to the online research site and select a *database*. Now you have to tell the system where you want to look. Do you want to look within a specific court's opinions? Are you searching for a form? Or, as we will be doing here, are you wanting to search in publications that can teach us more about a legal topic, and then lead us to even more authority?

For online research sites, a database is the equivalent of a publication, a collection of books in a law library. If you were researching a book called *American Jurisprudence 2d* in the law library, you would look for that book on the shelves and start your research in the index of that book. The equivalent in researching online is to look for the *American Jurisprudence 2d* database in the website, then enter your search query in the text box.

The search query is the online research equivalent of an index.

