Cross-Database Searching: The Pros and Cons

Aggregator databases from vendors like Gale, EBSCO, and ProQuest tend to offer a single interface for most of their database products. Gale’s Academic OneFile, EBSCO’s Academic Search, and ProQuest Central are examples of these databases. There are many others as well. Each of these databases offers the option to search additional databases at the same time: a cross-database search. Within the Gale interface, databases that aggregate content like InfoTrac Newstand, LegalTrac, World History in Context, and the New York Times can be cross-searched, but specialized resources like Gale Literary Sources, Gale Primary Sources, the Making of the Modern World, and Sabin Americana, 1500–1926 are not cross-searchable. This is probably a good thing, since these resources tend to be primary sources and have their own specialized metadata structures that make them different from the aggregated content.

EBSCO, on the other hand, tends to make many more of its databases with various content types cross-searchable. One can cross-search Academic Search at the same time as the very specialized, thesaurus-controlled databases like the MLA International Bibliography, EconLit, and PsycInfo. ProQuest follows a model more like EBSCO, enabling cross-searching of the aggregated content of ProQuest Central while at the same time cross-searching primary sources like American Periodicals, 1740–1940, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, Vogue Archive, and Trench Journals and Unit Magazines of the First World War (1914–1919), as well as thesaurus-controlled databases like PsycInfo, Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (LLBA), and Sociological Abstracts.

Figure 1. Setting up cross-searchable databases in ProQuest for primary and secondary sources.
When you combine two or more databases together for cross-searching purposes, the field limiters that would be present with a single database search disappear and are replaced by more general search fields that are applicable across all of the databases. Here, for example, is the *PsycInfo* advanced search page when searching the database by itself (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Advanced search in ProQuest’s PsycInfo as a separate database.**

Notice in Figure 2 that you can select each of the various fields that may be present within a *PsycInfo* record including record type, methodology, language, age group, and target audience. There are other fields as well, but you get the point.

Now look at what happens when you select *PsycInfo* together with another database. Figure 3 shows what happens when *PsycInfo* and *Sociological Abstracts* are both selected to be cross-searched together.
Figure 3. Limited fixed-field options with cross-searching ProQuest PsycInfo and Sociological Abstracts.

There is a place for cross-database searching. You just need to understand the pros and cons and what to expect when you search across multiple databases.

Use a cross-database search when:

- You have a very obscure topic and need to search across a large number of databases at one time;
- You have a focused keyword search;
- You don’t need to search by specialized fields or controlled vocabulary terms;
- You are not a specialist in the field, and you just need some quick information.

Search a database by itself when:

- You need to find “all and only” the content for a topic using the controlled vocabulary in a specialized database;
- You need to use special fixed-field limiters (such as “age group” or “methodology” within PsycInfo);
- You are a specialist, and you need to discover results with precision and accuracy.