

Political Science 083T First Year Seminar
Prof. Baumgartner
Home work due on Monday Nov 17, 2008

Last week's assignment gave you this heads-up:

What's the assignment for next week?

Next time, we'll go to this same source but search for themes using keyword searches. So think of topics that interest you and play around to identify the key-words that seem to work. Read the "search tips" so that you understand what "Boolean operators" are and how to use them, and also the idea of "within 3" to get cases where two words are used near each other but not necessarily in order. Consider something simple like how would you search for articles related to "nuclear energy" or something like that. Consider something even simpler like searches for "Richard Nixon" (but note he was sometimes referred to as "Richard M. Nixon" and sometimes "President Nixon" and sometimes "Vice-President Nixon" and sometimes "Tricky Dick". Now consider something harder like how would you approach the question of identifying stories on a topic such as health care reform. Play around on the site and get familiar with these search options. Knowing how to do this will be very helpful. It will allow you to find information, but also track how things change over time, if you do the same search for different historical periods. More details to follow on this assignment when the time comes.

So here is the assignment:

Pick a topic that interests you and which will be useful for academic research. (That is, not "Pittsburgh Penguins.") Make sure that the issue is one that is amenable to historical coverage, that is, which refers to something that exists over time. (This might mean that you avoid proper names, for example specific pieces of legislation.) Explain the topic in plain English, on a separate piece of paper with your name on it. Pick something where the topic can be researched from 1945 to present.

This is not that easy. Deciding exactly on what the topic is will determine how hard it is to do your search. Do not pick anything that is *itself* a keyword, or which is specific to only a single point in time. That is, don't pick "No Child Left Behind" as that refers to a specific law which didn't exist in the 1980s, but if you are interested in that general topic then describe it as "educational reform" or "federal involvement in education" or "school choice" or "the school vouchers movement" which are ideas or concepts that cover the same ground.) Some good topics would be for example climate change or race relations or poverty or immigration or health insurance availability or election finance laws or something like that. Avoid proper names (they are too easy!)

Now the task is to explore a series of keywords to see if you can get the computer to produce results that make sense, given your statement of your topic. Let's do this in a few steps. Print out the following pages and comment on them by hand in the margins:

- 1) Try your first cut at the keyword using the NYTimes Historical, let's say 1945 to present. If you get more than 1,000 hits, then pick a narrower slice in time. Read

through a dozen of them chosen randomly. Print out the first page of results and describe your sense of whether you are missing things or if you have large numbers of “false positives.” Start with a very simple search term.

- 2) Revise your search terms based on what you saw, paying particular attention to reducing the false positives. Use Boolean operators, and learn how these work through experimentation. Make sure you understand at least the following types of commands and options:
 - a. nuclear power v “nuclear power” v nuclear w/3 power v (nuclear OR atomic) AND (energy OR power)
 - b. NOT (Russia or Soviet or bomb or military or England or China or India)
 - c. You don’t have to print all the results, but try your search in many different ways and see what makes a difference and what does not, so that you understand exactly what the computer is doing.
 - d. Read through another random set of a dozen hits. Print out the first page of results and describe how good it is.
- 3) Keep doing this until you are satisfied you have a successful set of key-words. Print out maybe 3 of the searches including the first one, an intermediate one, and your final one that you think works best.
- 4) If you never reach a point where you think it works very accurately, and you believe it is impossible to do so, then provide the best you can do and comment on why you think it is no good. Then do a search on a related topic that *is* feasible and describe the difference between the one that didn’t work and the one that did work. If you have to do it twice, then for the second version, just print out the final version of your search and explain how you revised your topic and how well you think this search worked.

Altogether, this assignment calls for you to hand in maybe 5 pages of search results, with your hand-written comments on them.

Also, in order to save hassle for your next assignment, you might want to cut and paste your final set of search terms into a notepad document and save it as “Baumgartner_search_terms.txt” on your usb drive or computer. After Thanksgiving you’ll have another assignment that involves doing this search over and over again for different years so you can track attention to an issue over time.