Stump the Database

This is a simple activity intended to warm up students, break the ice, and introduce the concept of keyword searching. Ask students to come up with a single word search that gives zero results. It’s harder than it sounds. It may be too elementary for graduate students or upperclassmen; use your judgement about students’ abilities and familiarity with searching.

1. Open a search engine, database, or your library’s discovery layer.
2. Tell students the object of the game is to get zero results from a search. The catch is that they can only search one word at a time. (It’s up to you if you want to count multi-word proper nouns e.g. Beyoncé Knowles Carter, European Union, etc.)
3. You can group students into teams or have them guess individually. You can type their search terms in yourself or have the student come up to the instructor computer and type in their search.
4. After five or six searches, wrap up the activity by asking a few discussion questions like
   1. Which searches got the fewest results? Why?
   2. What, if anything, have we learned from this activity?
   3. What could we do to get closer to zero?
   4. Why was it so difficult (or easy, depending on the scenario) to get zero results?

This activity can be a great segue in to a lesson on keyword development, Boolean operators, popular terminology vs. technical jargon, and the differences between different kinds of databases.