Most catalogs and databases use Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) to deliver you results. This is how they work:

AND – this term narrows your results by only showing articles that include both (or all if you use more than two) of your keywords in the same article
If you put in pirate AND ship you will get the middle section of results.

OR – this term expands your results by showing articles that include either of your keywords
If you put in pirate OR buccaneer you will get all sections of the results

NOT – this term excludes results by showing articles that contain the first keyword and not the second, which can help exclude erroneous results, but if you are not careful will exclude useful ones too—use with caution!
If you put pirate NOT English you will get the left section of results

This is where you need to be careful… if you do this searching thinking you are just excluding English pirates, you will also be excluding articles that discuss Spanish pirates who attack English shipping, French buccaneers active during war years (when the French are fighting the English), etc.
Some other tricks are useful when you have multi-word keywords, various spellings, or are searching primary sources with rather questionable spelling.

Phrase searching – use quotation marks around two or more words that need to be next to each other in your results, not just in the same article

For example: “jolly roger” will get you pirate flags, but jolly roger will get you citations like: Garis, Howard Roger. Uncle Wiggily's Adventures. 2005. (The database pulled Roger from the author's name and jolly from somewhere in the full text. Not so much about pirates…)

Other phrases would be: “sea rover,” “Calico Jack,” or “south sea”

Truncation – this allows you to search multiple variations of a word at once by inserting an * at the end of the root word

For example: buccaneer* will give you results for buccaneer, buccaneers, and buccaneering
mutin* will give results for mutinous, mutiny, mutinies, mutineer, mutinying, and mutinied

Wild Card – placing a wildcard in your search also helps to search for variations, and can be especially helpful when searching for primary sources which might use a long s (ʃ) or to account for non-standardized spelling
For example: p?rate will find both pirate and pyrate