Sometimes computers seem to have a one-track mind! Why do I say that? Well, the other day I was searching in my library’s online catalog for books on teenagers and smoking. I had done a keyword search by typing:

teenagers and smoking

I got a list of about 30 book titles to choose from, and though some of the titles were pretty good, I still wanted more information. A friend of mine was sitting at the computer next to me and told me that I should try truncating the words. I had no idea what he was talking about, so he showed me this trick:

Truncating my search term gives me books that use any of these keywords:

teen, teens, teenager, teenagers, teenaged

In other words, I get all the variations of the root word.

The root word for smoking is smoke. This is a little trickier. If I put the asterisk after smoke*, I would not get the word smoking. Truncation adds endings right after the wild card, and smoking is not spelled smokeing.

To see the maximum number of words, make the root word shorter and truncate it this way: smok*

Then you will get:

smoke, smoker, smokers, smoking

My new keyword search using truncation looked like this:

teen* and smok*

By using truncation, I helped the computer get off its one-track mind and ended up getting over 60 titles instead of 30. I got books that had chapters on teens and smoking, teenaged smokers, and the effect of smoke on teens. Truncation rocks!
P.S. A few weeks later, I was doing a search for information on the use of ethanol fuel and cars. I thought it would be good to truncate the word car so that I would get car and cars. So I did this search:

ethanol and car*

This was a problem because I got all kinds of strange titles relating to cancer, alcoholism, and plants! Why? When you truncate a short word, you will get all kinds of variations of the word. Just think about how many words start with the letters C - A - R.

Here are some of the combinations the computer found:

ethanol and skin care

ethanol and carotene

a book about ethanol by Joseph Carter

a chapter on ethanol by Carol Goodman

a book with one chapter about ethanol and another chapter about carrots

and a book about ethanol use in cars

When you are truncating a short word, it is usually better to do two separate searches:

ethanol and car

ethanol and cars

Or use the Boolean connector OR for this search:

ethanol and (car or cars)

Truncation rocks, but it can sometimes be rocky.