

Steps to constructing a search strategy

1. Summarise the topic

Briefly describe what you want to find information about.

For example:- I want to find research on the mental health of adolescents in rural communities.

2. Identify the concepts

Databases search for single words or two or three word terms so from your summary select the key or significant words in your topic.

For example:- I want to find research on the mental health of adolescents in rural communities

3. Select the terms

The database is literal. It will search for the key words exactly as you type them in the search box. Consider the following about your key words:-

- Variant endings of the word, including plurals and other extensions of the root word.** Truncation is a useful technique to save you having to type in all the possible endings you would like to include in your search. Type in the root and the truncation symbol (which varies with the database) to retrieve all the endings.
 For example:- child* retrieves child's, children, childhood, etc. and adolescen* retrieves adolescent, adolescents, adolescence
- Possible synonyms or related terms**
 See the table below for synonyms you may want to include for adolescents and rural. If the database has standardised search terms (found in the thesaurus and the descriptors) you can use the standardised term for all synonyms.
 A related term for mental illness that you may want to include is depression.
- Alternative spellings**
 On international databases this will include British and American English spellings. Databases use a wildcard symbol to deal with this e.g. globali?ation, counsel?ing, behavio?r

Your search could be expressed in this way

Concept 1 Terms	Concept 2 Terms	Concept 3 Terms
mental health or depression	adolescen* or youth or teenage*	rural or farm*

4. Combine the terms

Databases are logical in the way they operate. The database does not know how your search words relate to one another until you connect them with a logical operator.

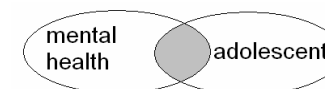
The two most often used connectors *and* and *not*. The connector you choose depends on the results you wish to retrieve from your search.

For example:-



retrieves records where either or both words are present

or



retrieves records which contain both words

and

Term 1		Term 2		Term 3
mental health or depression	and	adolescen* or teenage* or youth	and	rural Or farm*

When two or more sets are combined using *or* they must be grouped within brackets. Your search strategy will look like this:-

(mental health or depression) and (adolescen or youth or teenage*) and (rural or farm)*

Database thesaurus

The academic subject-specific databases provide a list of standardised search words used on the database. This is particularly useful where synonyms or alternative spellings are involved.

The standardised words also appear in the descriptor field of a record, denoting the subject focus of the article being referenced. This has the effect of grouping all records on the same subject together, regardless of the words used by the author.

The thesaurus also lists related, broader and narrower terms which you may want to incorporate into your search.

Note: Remember to check the **Help** screen on the database for information such as the symbols used for truncation and alternative spellings, and the connectors available.

Limiting searches using field searching

A database record is made up of a number of fields, each containing a separate piece of information about the referenced journal article. Most databases allow you to refine your search by searching for a word in a particular field.

You can confine your results to only those articles written in English (the language field), or only those published from 1995 onwards (the publication year field).

Useful fields for limiting searches include:-

author	language	publication year
descriptor	journal title	document type

Managing your search results

Too many citations retrieved?

Your search is too general. Try these methods to make it more specific:-

- Add another key word to your search using the connector *and*.
- Do a descriptor field search, using the thesaurus for guidance with search terms to use. The database will only look for the search word where it appears in the descriptor (subject) field, thus retrieving only the most relevant records.
- Limit your search by language, publishing year, to a particular journal etc
- Check that you are not using *or* to connect search words, rather than *and*.

Too few citations retrieved?

You need to broaden your search. Try these methods:-

- Check whether you have misspelt or mistyped a search word.
- Check the thesaurus for synonyms or related words to include in your search. Connect them with existing terms using *or*.
- Truncate your search terms to retrieve variant endings.
- Check whether you are connecting synonyms terms using *and* instead of *or*.
- Check that you are using the right database for your topic.

For further help

For further help with your searches contact the Information Librarian for your subject.