

Developing Keywords

Strong keywords are the foundation of every successful search.

Outcome: By the end of this handout, you'll be able to identify strong keywords, refine your search strategy, and use alternative keywords to explore different perspectives.

Keywords are Your Powerwords

Think of keywords as the **clues that guide your search**. They're the **powerwords** that describe the main ideas in your research question, and they're the words databases pay attention to.

- What is your research question? Write your question in one sentence.
- Circle your research concepts - the words that capture what you really want to explore.
- Cross out general words that don't help your search (like does, relationship, or effect).

Remember: Search tools look for **concepts**, not complete sentences.

Narrow Your Search

Getting thousands of results? Your keywords may be too broad. Try narrowing your search by adding details about the:

- **Who?** (population or age group)
- **Where?** (country, city, region)
- **When?** (time period)
- **What?** (specific event or topic)

You can also: Put exact phrases in **quotation marks** or add another keyword using **AND**.

Expand and Refine Your Search

Researchers almost never find the perfect search on the first try. Not finding enough? Instead of giving up, don't start over - **refine** your keywords.

- Write 2–4 synonyms for your research concepts (example: teen, adolescent, youth).
- Try **OR** between similar terms (example: teen **OR** adolescent).
- Search a broader category (example: “social media” instead of “TikTok”).
- Consider historical terms that may have been used in older sources.

Remember: Research is **iterative**. Every search helps you refine the next.

Consider Different Perspectives

The keywords you choose can shape the sources you find. Some keywords reflect different perspectives or biases. Try alternative terms to broaden your understanding of a topic.

- Try alternative keywords that describe the same concept.
- Consider how different keywords may reflect different viewpoints.
- Ask yourself: *Could someone else describe this topic differently?*
- Compare the results you get with different keywords.

Remember: Different keywords can help you discover more sources and perspectives.

When You Search, Remember to Ask Yourself

- Have I identified my research concepts?
- Are my keywords too broad or too narrow?
- Have I tried synonyms or related terms?
- Could different keywords help me find new perspectives?

Tip: There’s no such thing as a “perfect” search. Research is a process of asking, learning, and trying again. Every search helps you refine your keywords, improve your search strategy, and build a deeper understanding of your topic.

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