Building A Search Strategy

In today’s electronic world, most journal or magazine articles can be found online through subscription databases. Briggs Library has print subscriptions to many journals, but those numbers are decreasing as more and more full text articles are made available electronically. Therefore, it is crucial that you know how to find articles using electronic databases and books using the library catalog. Thinking about your research topic and developing a search strategy before you sit down in front of the computer should save you time (and cause less frustration).

Generating search terms

Stringing keywords together may be the best way to search for information in a search engine like Google, but you may want to refine your search to limit the results. To get the best search results you need to determine what you are looking for and what terms should be searched.

1. Get started by choosing a broad topic
2. Gather background information
   ○ Encyclopedias
   ○ Dictionaries
   ○ Class textbooks/ readings
   ○ Don’t forget to look at the citations and bibliographies listed; these can start you in the right direction
3. What specifically are you interested in? Can you limit it by
   ○ Time
   ○ Place
   ○ Person
   ○ Other aspects of the topic
4. Write down a research statement you would like to explore.
5. Locate the key terms from that statement and create a list of terms you would like to search as well as appropriate synonyms or related terms.
6. Using the terms and limiters you have developed, generate a search (or searches).

Example

1. Broad topic: Information literacy
2. Gather background information
3. What I’m specifically interested in:
   ○ Place: college
   ○ Other: academic success
4. Research Statement: How do information literacy requirements contribute to academic success in college?
5. Key Terms: “information literacy,” success, college

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Terms</th>
<th>Synonyms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Information literacy”</td>
<td>Digital literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Media literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Computer literacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>Achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accomplishment</td>
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<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>University</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Higher education</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Post-secondary</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

6. See below for searches created using Boolean searches.

**Boolean searching**

Now that you’ve found some terms to search for, how should you link them together?

| Quotation marks “ “ | Searches for words between the quote marks exactly as they appear.  
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                     | Example: “information literacy”  
|                     | “higher education”                                                   |
| AND                 | Searches for items where all of the terms appear. More inclusive with fewer results.  
|                     | Example: university AND achievement                                 |
| OR                  | Searches for all the search terms listed. The more terms listed the more results you get.  
|                     | Example: information OR literacy OR media                          |
| ¹NOT                | Removes certain words from the search. Allows you to limit result you might not want.  
|                     | Example: “information literacy” NOT K-12                           |
| ¹Nesting ()         | Groups similar terms together for better search results.           
|                     | Example: “information literacy” AND (college OR university)         |

¹NOT and nesting may not work in all search engines. If you are not getting the results you want, check the Help link for information on Boolean searching or talk with a librarian at the Reference Desk.
You are now ready to find a database to search. If you are unsure which database to use, check Research Guides or talk with a reference librarian.

**Other search terms**

Some databases also allow you to limit your search terms by something other than keyword, most commonly title, author or subject. There may be drop down menus or you may just key in an abbreviation for the field you would like to search.

**Example**

- **TI:** Faculty-Librarian Collaboration to Achieve Integration of Information Literacy
- **AU:** Joyce Lindstrom
- **SU:** information literacy

Take care when searching for subject because subject and keyword are different. Subjects are generated from a controlled vocabulary while keyword might be provided by the author or the publisher. When searching, don’t be afraid to try the same search term in each field.