

Search Tips: a brief guide to effective searching

Step 1 : Select appropriate resources

Ask yourself....

a. **What type of information am I looking for?**

- **Books** – useful for giving a broad overview of a subject;
- **Journal articles** – an invaluable resource for researchers. Articles are a source of up-to-date, in-depth scholarly information;
- **Statistics** – up to date official statistics are a useful way to illustrate a point.
- **Official publications** - such as reports from government departments, bills, command papers and Acts of Parliament – provide information on government policy, legislation and proposed legislation.
- **News** – newspaper information can be biased and sometimes incorrect but is useful for current issues or breaking news.

b. **Which resources are most likely to contain the type of information I am looking for?**

- **A Library catalogue** will help you locate reference books and books for borrowing and also theses written by post-graduate students.
- **A bibliographic database** such as *MEDLINE* or *ProQuest Central* will help you identify articles in Human and Health Sciences journals.
- **The Office for National Statistics website** will help you find up-to-date statistics for the UK.
- **Times Digital Archive** and **Nexis UK** are newspaper databases.

Step 2 : Devise a search strategy

- Think about your research topic and clarify your ideas. Think about geographical and time limits – Global/Europe/UK/Wales? ; 20th century/last decade/last month?
- Divide your topic into concepts. For example if your research topic was “*Support for families with problems in the UK, specifically Wales*” your concepts would be:

Concept 1
problems

Concept 2
families

Concept 3
support

Concept 4
UK , Wales

For each concept think of broader and narrower terms, synonyms and alternative spellings:

Concept 1
conflict
dysfunction
disruption
domestic violence
alcoholism
drug abuse
illness

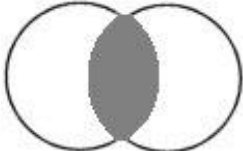
Concept 2
parents
homes
children
siblings

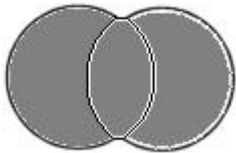
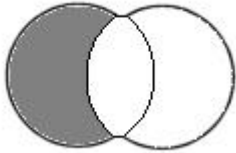
Concept 3
intervention
conflict resolution
parent training

Concept 4
UK / GB
Wales/ Welsh
United Kingdom
Great Britain

Step 3 : Searching on a database: some general principles

- Use one of our Database guides if possible or use *Online* help.
- Most searchable databases share some common features but there are differences.
- Use Boolean operators (AND ; OR ; NOT) to link your search terms eg.
problems and families and support will only find results which contain all three words. **AND** will narrow your search.
conflict or dysfunction or problems will find results which contain one of these three words. **OR** will broaden your search.
Wales not Australia will find results about Wales but not about New South Wales (hopefully). **NOT** will exclude a term from your search.

Aim	Boolean Operator	Search Examples	Retrieval Formula
To narrow your search results	AND	problems AND families dysfunction AND child* conflict AND homes	 Only retrieves records containing all terms

To broaden your search results	OR	conflict OR problems intervention OR conflict resolution children OR siblings UK OR United Kingdom OR Great Britain	 Retrieves records containing either one or more terms
To exclude a term from your search	NOT	Wales NOT Australia sibling* NOT twins	 Excludes records containing the second term

- Many databases have a truncation symbol (usually an asterisk) to pick up plurals and so on, e.g. child* will pick up children, childhood, childlike etc.
- Many databases have a wildcard symbol (usually a ?) to represent one or more characters in the middle of a word e.g. wom?n will find woman and women.
- Use inverted commas (“ ”) when searching for a phrase, e.g. “united nations”.
- Some databases are created in the USA so be aware of American spellings and terminology e.g. organisation/ organization ; behavior/behaviour ; labor/labour. Using the wildcard symbol (?) will help with your search, for example behavio?r will find both spellings – behavior and behaviour.
- Some databases (such as [ASSIA](#)) have an in-built **thesaurus**. Check it out to make sure you’ve identified all the best “descriptor” terms for your topic. For example the descriptor term “intercountry adoption” will retrieve 100s of article references, but the term “overseas adoption” which a user may first think of, will only retrieve a handful.