

Develop a search strategy



A search strategy begins by making sure you fully understand what you are being asked to write about. Before you start searching you should be clear about the main topics or concepts that you want to find information about.

Choose search terms

Identify keywords

From your research question you will need to identify your keywords. These will form your initial search terms.

Example topic:

“How relevant is Shakespeare in today’s multicultural society?”

Here, your keywords are going to be **Shakespeare** and **multicultural**.

Consider alternative terms

After you have identified your keywords it is important to consider synonyms, related terms, or alternative spellings. Researchers don't all use the same keywords as there can be many different words to describe the same thing or concept. By considering alternative search terms you will ensure that you don't miss literature that uses slightly different language. Your research question may use one particular keyword, but other really useful articles written on the same topic may use alternative terms.

Possible synonyms for **Shakespeare**

Shakespeare’s, Shakespearean, Bard, OR even the broader topic, “Elizabethan theatre”

Possible synonyms for **multicultural**

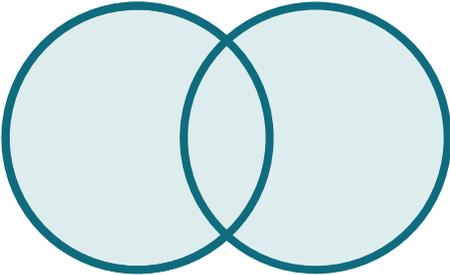
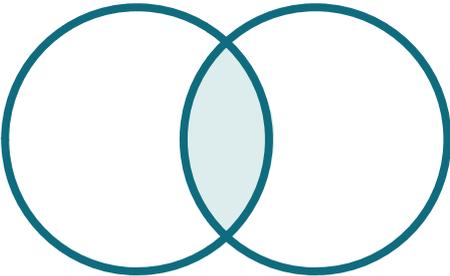
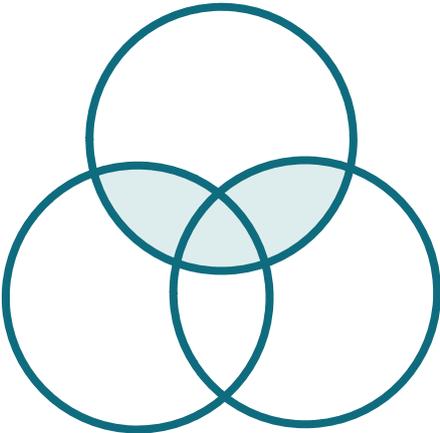
Culture, race, racial, ethnic OR ethnicity

How do you think of synonyms?

- Try using a thesaurus to consider new search terms.
- Are there any acronyms for your keywords? E.g. UK for United Kingdom
- Look back through your notes or background materials to see any alternative words in use which you may not have considered.

Combine search terms

Once you have identified your search terms you can then consider how to combine the terms in a meaningful way. Boolean search logic helps you to do this, enabling you to narrow or broaden your search by combining or excluding terms.

<p>Broad search: OR</p> <p>When you are searching by keywords or subject terms, you want to be sure to find all possible variations and alternatives for the same concept. To do this, combine search terms with OR. This will do a broad search, finding EITHER of your terms. Your results will be broader than if you had just used one word or combined the words using AND.</p>	 <p>Shakespeare OR Shakespearean</p>
<p>Narrow search: AND</p> <p>When you have considered all synonyms and alternative terms for each search term, you will want to combine your topics, to find research that covers both or all of your search areas. To do this, combine your search terms with AND. This means you want to look for BOTH keywords; one as well as the other. Your results will be narrower than if you had just used one keyword or combined the words using OR.</p>	 <p>Shakespeare AND multicultural</p>
<p>Using (brackets) AND & OR</p> <p>The search terms for each separate concept are grouped together with brackets. This means you want to look for the first term with one of the second terms. Using brackets combines the first term with one of the second terms. In this example, your results will include Shakespeare in combination with multicultural OR race.</p>	 <p>Shakespeare AND (multicultural OR race)</p>

Advanced search techniques

Additional techniques can help you to remove irrelevant results and check for alternative spelling.

“Phrase searching”

This technique can narrow your search by removing unrelated results. Using “speech marks” around your keywords will ensure that your keywords will appear next to each other as a phrase rather than the words appearing separately anywhere in the article.

“multicultural society” rather than multicultural society

Wildcards

This technique will broaden your search to account for words of the same meaning but with variations of spelling. Wildcards use a symbol to substitute a letter in a word. A ? is the commonly used symbol but some databases may differ. Check the help screens for more information.

organi?ation would retrieve **organisation** or **organization**

Truncation

This technique will broaden your search to include various word endings. Often a keyword may feature in plural and singular form, or as a root word with multiple endings. An * is the commonly used symbol but some databases may differ. Check the help screens for more information.

collaborat* would retrieve **collaboration, collaborative, collaborate, collaborates**

Enhance your searches

Keep up to date with research by setting up search alerts

Many databases allow you to save searches you have ran. Whenever a new article is added to the database which matches your search criteria, you will be notified by email or via a web feed. This allows you to stay informed of the most recent developments in your topic.

Citation search

If you have found a useful article, some databases will allow you to search forward and see which newer articles have cited your known article. This allows you to find articles on a similar topic or research area without having to run a new search or enter keywords. [Web of Science](#), [ScienceDirect](#), [Scopus](#) and [Google Scholar](#) all have citation searching available.

Keep track of your results

Keep a note of all your search terms as you may uncover new terms as you search. Some searches may return more relevant results than others so note down what works and what doesn't.