Devising a search strategy & searching checklist

Devising a search strategy
Planning a search strategy clarifies your thinking about your topic and helps ensure that you are looking for information appropriate to your task. Taking a few minutes to plan before you begin searching will save you time once you start searching the literature.

Before you search: Search terms/expressions
1. Think about your topic or area of interest and ask yourself questions to clarify your ideas.
   For example, if you are looking for information about racism, ask yourself relevant questions such as:
   - What particular aspect of racism am I interested in?
     For example: racial equality/ causes of racism/ attitudes to racial groups/ racism towards particular ethnic groups etc.
   - Am I interested in racism from a particular perspective?
     For example: historical, psychological, sociological

2. Define your topic in one phrase e.g. racial attitudes in employment

3. Split your phrase into concepts:
   Concept 1      Concept 2      Concept 3
   racial          attitudes         employment

4. For each concept, make a list of alternative terms that could also be used to describe the concept:
   Concept 1      Concept 2      Concept 3
   racial          attitudes         employment
   ethnic          beliefs           work
   prejudice

Because many of the resources include international coverage, ensure you consider:
- Differences in spelling for different nationalities e.g. American English
- The terms used to describe the concept in your and other (if appropriate) discipline areas

5. Consider the nature of the information that you require:-

Type of information: biographical, historical, statistical, analytical
- Format of information: books, journal articles, newspaper articles, reviews, conference papers, correspondence, film, video, audio
- Availability of information: can it be accessed in the Library or freely from the Student & Library Services website?
- Amount of information: often you need to be very selective, as you can retrieve too much information to be able to assimilate effectively
- Currency of the information
6. Select your resource according to its suitability for the task at hand. There are a range of databases available on the S&LS website, from general to subject specific, and it is worth trying more than one.

**Gaining worthwhile results**

**WARNING:** Most searchable resources share some basic characteristics; however, each may operate in its own unique way. There is no standard method by which searchable resources interpret your search terms/expressions, Boolean connectors etc. For this reason, it is important to utilise any online help facilities when using a resource for the first time (or revisiting after a period of time).

Gaining worthwhile results may ultimately depend on how you make use of your search terms/expressions in conjunction with the particular search features offered by the resource.

**Performing an initial search**

It may be helpful to use no more than two of your search concepts when performing your initial search as this can provide a useful starting point for you to decide how to proceed.

- Review the results from your initial search: are you getting useful results?
- Refer back to your original concepts and search terms
- Modify your search terms/expressions, for example:
  - Use synonyms to replace any terms that give unwanted results
  - Add or remove one of your concepts
  - Widen or narrow your search by using the features offered by the resource (consult the help)
  - Consult the online help for general searching advice
- Be methodical. Recording your search terms/expressions as you progress may help you focus. Most databases allow you to check your search history, and save search alerts.

**Common search features**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Truncation</td>
<td>To indicate missing letter/s so that your search term is interpreted as any word containing the letters you have specified - the root of the word</td>
<td>attitud* (Other symbols may be used for truncation. Always check the online help)</td>
<td>Results containing words such as attitudinal, attitude, attitudes etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limiting search fields</td>
<td>To control your search results by specifying field parameters e.g. language</td>
<td>Limit to English</td>
<td>Yields results that contain items written only in English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Boolean connectors

Sometimes referred to as logical operators these allow you to specify how you would like the resource to use the terms when interpreting your search expression.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Connector</th>
<th>Notation used</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AND</td>
<td>Various – check the help</td>
<td>racial AND attitudes</td>
<td>Results contain both terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OR</td>
<td>Various – check the help</td>
<td>racial OR attitudes</td>
<td>Results contain either term i.e. they only have to contain one of these terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOT</td>
<td>Various – check the help</td>
<td>racial NOT attitudes</td>
<td>Results contain racial but not attitudes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some resources also feature a thesaurus which contains the terms (and their meanings) as used by the resource.

NOTE: Always ensure you know what features are available and how they are represented (especially Boolean connectors). Appearances can be deceiving, assume nothing and use the online help!

### Checklist

You are more likely to search efficiently and effectively if you take a methodical approach. Remember resources vary in terms of the features they offer and how they are applied. Consulting the online help will save you time and anguish!

This checklist is designed to remind you of the things that can contribute to a successful and happy searching experience.

### Before you search

- Devise a search strategy
- Select your resource carefully (not necessarily a familiar and/or ‘comfortable’ one)
- Click on LibGuides and then select your subject area to see a listing of the most appropriate resources for your subject area. Click on ‘Finding Journal Articles’ (this heading may vary slightly according to subject) to see relevant databases. Click on the name of the database to enter the database and to be able to search in a focussed way.
- Consult the online help (or Helpsheet if available) to find out:
  - about search features
  - how to use them
  - how to make best use of the resource for your purposes

### Once you have begun searching

- Review your initial search results
- Modify your search terms/expressions if necessary
- Keep focused! - refer back to your strategy regularly
- Keep a record of the search terms that prove the most useful, and which resources yielded the best results for your topic
- Consult the factsheet or online help to find out about the options available for saving your results
- When saving search results, label them in a way that will be identifiable in 3 months’ time!

For more information please ask a member of staff for help.

W: [http://lis.tees.ac.uk/](http://lis.tees.ac.uk/)
E: [libraryhelp@tees.ac.uk](mailto:libraryhelp@tees.ac.uk)
T: 01642 342100 (Monday – Friday 09:00 – 17:00)