

Literature searching FAQs

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For further information regarding literature searching [contact Rachel Posaner \(/facilities/hsmc-library/about/contact-us.aspx\)](#).

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Where do I start?

For a quick overview have a look at our [6-step guide \(/Documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/hsmc-library/guide/6-steps-literature-search.pdf\)](#) and our [online tutorial \(/http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/facilities/hsmc-library/help-and-training/activity/1-introduction.aspx\)](#). Develop a search strategy using our [search strategy sheet \(/Documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/hsmc-library/forms/search-strategy-form.doc\)](#).

Contact us for help specific to your research project, or for a training session (either in the library or via our [virtual library clinic \(/http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/facilities/hsmc-library/help-and-training/Virtual-Library-Clinic.aspx\)](#)).

Finally, have a look at the two books below for a thorough introduction to the principles of searching for literature.

[Doing a literature search by Christopher Hart \(/https://cssfs8.bham.ac.uk/HeritageScripts/Hapi.dll/retrieve?SetID=57A8C3EB-23EB-437D-90DF-9E04685D2CD3&searchterm=hart&Fields=%40&Media=%23&Bool=AND&SearchPrecision=10&SortOrder=T1&Offset=3&Direction=%2E&Dispfmt=F&Dispfmt_b=B26&Dispfmt_f=F10&DataSetName=HERITAGE\)](#)

[Doing a literature review in health and social care: a practical guide by Helen Aveyard \(/https://cssfs8.bham.ac.uk/HeritageScripts/Hapi.dll/search2?searchterm=Doing%20a%20literature%20review%20in%20health%20and%20social%20care&Fields=%40&Media=%23&Bool=AND\)](#)

Why do I have to write a search strategy?

Having a good search strategy will increase the chances of you finding relevant and high quality information. This is because a good search strategy will help to keep you focused on the relevance and non-relevance of specific terms in relation to what you are looking for. It will also save you time by not having to duplicate your efforts when re-running searches on different databases.

To help formulate a good search strategy download this ["search strategy sheet" \(/Documents/college-social-sciences/social-policy/hsmc-library/forms/search-strategy-form.doc\)](#) which will guide you through the process.

Why can't I just use Google, Google Scholar or Wikipedia?

[Google \(/http://www.google.co.uk\)](#) is a great Internet search engine when looking for a specific information. However, beware that it does bring up a lot of irrelevant information such as adverts, inappropriate webpages and inaccessible resources.

[Google Scholar \(/http://scholar.google.com\)](#) is a freely available resource to help you search for scholarly material from around the world such as journal articles, conference papers, theses and books across all subject areas. It is very easy to use and has an advanced search option which allows you to specify particular authors, journals or date ranges when searching. What's more if you are searching from on the University of Birmingham campus or are logged into Findit you will be able to access full text articles directly from the search results.

However, Google Scholar does have a few weaknesses including its tendency to search primarily for information from the medical, scientific and technical subject areas, and the fact that it does not reveal its sources.

So, in order to carry out a comprehensive search of the literature it is best not to just rely on this source but to search other peer-reviewed databases such as Medline, Cinahl, or the Health Management Information Consortium database (HMIC).

[Wikipedia \(/http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page\)](#) is a great place to start looking for information around a topic area. However, you do need to exercise some degree of caution when using Wikipedia as its content can be contributed, or changed by anyone at any time meaning that the information contained within it might not be accurate, comprehensive or impartial. So, when using Wikipedia it is always a good idea to both corroborate any information you find from an alternative authoritative source, and follow up some of its article references to check that they do support what is being claimed.

Which database should I use?

This depends on the topic you are going to research. Start by looking at our [list of useful databases \(/http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/facilities/hsmc-library/help-and-training/activity/7-useful-databases.aspx\)](#). We can offer you more detailed advice on suitable databases for your research project (and their individual quirks) upon request.

What is the best way of identifying synonyms or keywords?

The best way to identify synonyms or keywords is to use dictionaries, textbooks, lecture notes as well as asking your tutor for advice.

Don't forget to also use the ["snowballing" \(/http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/facilities/hsmc-library/help-and-training/activity/5-optional-features.aspx\)](#) technique and the [thesaurus \(/http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/facilities/hsmc-library/help-and-training/activity/5-optional-features.aspx\)](#) functions on the databases you are searching to help identify assigned subject headings, keywords and synonyms.

What are Boolean operators?

After identifying all the keywords, synonyms and phrases for your search, you can then decide on how best to combine them by using the boolean operators "AND," "OR," and "NOT."

How do I use Boolean operators in my search?

OR

You will use the word "OR" when you want to combine words or phrases which have the same or similar meaning, for example:

- rationing **OR** resource allocation **OR** decision making

AND

You will use the word "AND" to combine words of different meanings, for example:

- (rationing **OR** resource allocation) **AND** public opinion

NOT

You will use the word "NOT" if you want to exclude a term from your search, for example:

- rationing **NOT** United States (this will exclude material on rationing in the US).

What is the difference between a 'MESH' or 'subject' heading and a keyword?

A **'subject heading'** (<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/facilities/hsmc-library/help-and-training/activity/5-optional-features.aspx>) can sometimes be referred to as either a 'descriptor' or 'MESH' heading (Medical Subject Heading). It is the name given to a set of controlled vocabulary, derived from the databases' own thesaurus of terms, which are used to describe terms within an article or document.

A "keyword" is a word or phrase used by an author to describe a topic. These are often words which are found in the title and/or abstract of a reference.

What is truncation and should I be using it?

Truncation (<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/facilities/hsmc-library/help-and-training/activity/3-search-features.aspx>) is a symbol (usually * or \$) which can be put on the root or end of a word in order to try and capture all the different word endings.

For example a search on **primary\$** would find: primary, primary care, primary care trust, primary health care etc.

My search has brought up very few results, what am I doing wrong?

- Try using a thesaurus or dictionary to find more keywords, synonyms or alternative vocabulary.
- Try using different spellings e.g. 'organisation' or 'organization'.
- It might be that you have been too prescriptive in your searching and need to broaden out your search terms slightly in order to find relevant articles.
- It might also be the case that not a lot has been written in your subject area so there is not much to find! Your tutor might be able to advise you here.

My search has brought up thousands of results, what am I doing wrong?

In this case you really need to focus your search. For example, ask yourself:

- Can you make your search more focused by adding additional keywords or subject headings?
- Can you limit your search by date, country, publication type or gender?
- Can you identify any recurrent non-relevant terms which you can take out of your searching by using the Boolean operator 'NOT'?

Do I need to limit my search?

When constructing your question it is really important to think about other variables which you can use to "limit" your search results. This process will really help you to clarify the information you are looking for and so help you to find more focused results.

For example, ask yourself if you can limit your search by:

- **Publication date:** How far back do you want to search? Some databases go back to 1946, but you might only want information going back to the last 10 years.
- **Age:** Are you looking for information related to a certain age range? Some databases will allow you to limit your search by: infant, adult, adolescent, the elderly etc.
- **Material type:** What type of material are you hoping to retrieve? Are you specifically looking for: articles, RCTs, websites, statistics or grey literature? Most databases will allow you to limit your search by these publication types.
- **Language:** Do you only want to retrieve articles written in the English language? Most databases will let you limit your search by multiple languages.
- **Country of origin:** Are you looking for UK only based information? Most databases will allow you to limit your search by country, such as; UK, US or Europe.

Should I be using referencing software

Referencing software can save you a lot of time and a lot of stress when writing up your research. For example, software packages allow you to:

- Keep a record of all the databases you have searched
- Set up your own personal account to store or your references
- Insert your own bibliographic references and add notes
- Import references from different bibliographic databases
- Capture PDFs, links, files, images and web pages
- Create your own searchable subject-based folders of references
- Get rid of duplicates
- Create a bibliography of references in a variety of referencing styles, for instance Harvard
- Interact with Word enabling you cite while you write

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