

Developing a search strategy

Step 1: Examine your question

The first step is to define what your question is. You may already have been given your assignment title, but you still need to ensure that you thoroughly understand it.

This includes:

1. understanding all of the terms in your question
2. knowing what depth of information you need
3. considering the parameters of your research, e.g. it may cover a particular time period or geographical region

In other cases, for example when writing your thesis or dissertation, you will set your own title. In such cases, you need to think carefully about the parameters of your research:

1. Is there enough literature on your topic?
2. Is the scope of your topic realistic?

Step 2: Identify your key concepts

The next stage is to identify the key concepts in your question.

Key concepts are the nouns in your assignment title. These are the different chunks of meaning that define what the question is about.

Other types of terms in your question might be:

- Instruction words: normally verbs, these tell you what to do with the information about the key concepts; eg evaluate, describe, assess.
- Limiting words: these may appear in your question to restrict to a particular location, timeframe, population etc.

Examples

“Assess the impact that social media has had on recent outbreaks of civil unrest

The key concepts in this assignment title are:

- Social media
- Civil unrest

Step 3: Alternative search terms

The key concepts you have identified from your question are the topics you'll be searching for.

It's important to consider other words and phrases that might be used to describe these concepts, in order to perform a thorough search.

These alternative terms might take a number of forms:

Synonyms

Most concepts will have other words/phrases which have the same or a similar meaning as your original term.

Alternative spellings

Some terms might have different spellings, especially in American English. Wildcards allow you to do this.

Alternative endings

You might want to search for different forms of the same root word, for example plurals or different tenses. You can use truncation to help with this.

Examples

“Assess the impact that social media has had on recent outbreaks of civil unrest

We’ve already identified the key concepts:

| | |
|--------------|--------------|
| Social media | Civil unrest |
|--------------|--------------|

A list of alternative search terms for this title might look like this:

| | |
|-------------------|------------|
| Social network | Conflict |
| Social networking | Revolution |
| Twitter | Riot |
| Web 2.0 | Rioting |

Using **wildcards**, we can reduce the number of search terms to:

| | |
|-----------------|------------|
| Social network* | Conflict |
| Twitter | Revolution |
| Web 2.0 | Riot* |

Step 4: Consider limits

Now that you have a list of search terms, you need to consider what limits apply to your search.

These limits may be dictated in your question, or you may wish to focus your research to a particular timeframe, location or field of study.

On a more practical note, you may also want to limit your search to publications in a particular language.

Examples

Let's see how this applies to our example:

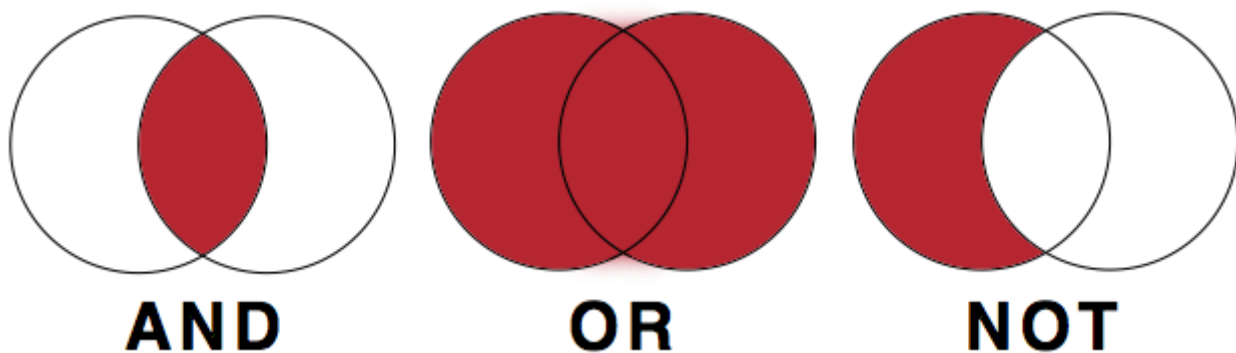
“Assess the impact that social media has had on recent outbreaks of civil unrest

The word “recent” dictates that you’ll need to limit your search by date. This example leaves room for interpretation; it doesn’t specify a particular date, so it would be up to you to decide how you wanted to focus your research.

In this example, you could also choose to focus your research further by concentrating on particular instances of civil unrest, e.g. the London riots in 2012, or the Moldovan protests in 2009. This would involve adding further terms to your list of key concepts.

Step 5: Combining your terms

Now that you have your list of search terms, it’s time to put them all together to perform a search.



AND

Use the Boolean operator AND to narrow search terms more effectively.

Example: **Bauhaus AND Albers** would return results that include **both** Bauhaus and Albers

OR

Use the Boolean operator OR to combine search terms.

The Boolean operator OR is helpful for search terms with varying spelling, e.g. o/ou or s/z in English; or when looking for a search term in different languages:

Example: **'labor policy' OR 'labour policy'** would return results containing **either** labor or labour.

Example: **'industrial design' OR Industriedesign** would return results containing **either** industrial design or Industriedesign

NOT

Use the Boolean operator NOT to exclude results.

Example: **bauhaus NOT band** would return only results which include the term bauhaus but do **not** include the term band

Step 6: Review your results

Once you've finished formulating your search, it's time to start searching.

It's important to remember that searching is an iterative process; you will often not get the results you want immediately.

You're satisfied with the list of results returned from your original search, you may stop at this point. If you get too many or too few results, you will need to adjust your search strategy. We'll look at how to do that next.

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