

Principles for Successful Research Database Searching

Six Secrets of Success

1. Know what you're looking for and don't waste your time with other stuff
2. Identify the best sources for the kind of information you need
3. Limit your search in ways appropriate to your needs
4. Combine terms or searches to narrow and focus your search
5. Find the right vocabulary for your topic
6. Search in the right 'fields' to get you the most targeted results

1. **Know what you're looking for:**

- What specific question are you trying to answer?
- What would a really excellent piece about your topic look like? What wouldn't it look like?

2. **Identify the best sources for the kind of information you need:**

- Do you need journal articles, newspapers, or other kinds of documents? Do you need peer-reviewed articles?
- Which database is best for this subject and type of information?

3. **Limit your search in ways appropriate to your needs**

- Limit your search to journals, or to peer-reviewed articles if required by your instructor
- We DON'T recommend limiting to full-text within any particular database, since the SFX feature will often find the full-text in a different database

4. **Combine search terms to narrow and focus your results:**

- Use **AND** to narrow your search to a particular aspect of a subject
- Use **OR** to broaden your search to include synonyms
- Combine a set of different searches to narrow your search (some databases have good 'search history' capabilities to make this possible)

5. **Find the right vocabulary for your topic:**

- Use the tools the database provides to find the right vocabulary for your topic. These might include:
 - "narrowing" suggestions or 'suggested topics'
 - lists of authorized 'subject terms' or topics (sometimes called a thesaurus)
- Go to the 'complete' record of a promising article to see what subject terms have been assigned to it.

6. **Search in the database fields that will give you the most targeted results**
- **Default search** – normally does a ‘keyword’ search looking for your search terms in all ‘fields’. Usually the best beginning point, though it may produce many irrelevant results because of the appearance of common words in abstracts, and especially in full text
 - **Subject field:** searches for your words only in the ‘authorized’ subject term assigned by indexers. **USE THIS FIELD ONLY ONCE YOU KNOW THE CORRECT SUBJECT TERMS**
 - **Title field:** looks for your words in only the title of the articles. Can be a very effective way of limiting your results to relevant articles, especially when vocabulary in the field is changing