How to: Plan Your Search Strategy

Step 1: Understand your topic

- Summarize your research topic in one sentence, or write it as a question.
- Circle the key words or phrases in it.

Step 2: Think about related topics

- List any additional keywords or phrases you can imagine. (These plus the ones in Step 1 are your “search terms.”)

Step 3: Brainstorm search terms

- Study these search terms. Using the boxes below, put related terms into groups or concepts.
- Think of alternative keywords for each term (synonyms; broader or narrower terms; related concepts; alternative spellings), consider terms used in recommended reading or you could learn more about the topic from reading an encyclopedia article.
- *Truncate terms* to expand your search results e.g. impact* will retrieve.... impact, impacts, impacting (check database help to establish the correct truncation symbol).

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Step 4: Construct a search statement

- Link the search terms using the Boolean Operators (AND, OR, NOT)

  - **AND** – narrows a search
  - **OR** – broadens a search
  - **NOT** – exclude terms from a search

- Use quotation marks to keep phrases together. e.g. “global warming”
- Use parentheses to tell the database to search for synonyms and alternative spellings (cellphones OR cell phones)
• Be prepared to revise your searches multiple times until you find the most successful ones.

Step 5: Choose databases to search

Databases are collections of periodical articles that can be searched all at once. They may contain articles from newspapers, popular magazines, scholarly journals or electronic books. The library subscribes to several different databases that can be used for your academic research.

• Go to the library website: http://www.sunywcc.edu/library

• If working from Westchester Community College campus or extension sites, click on FIND ARTICLES IN DATABASES.
• If working from home, click on Off-Campus Access. Enter your MY WCC username and password when prompted.

• Select one of the databases to search depending on your research goals.

Step 6: Consider the scope of your search

Some databases will allow you to add further limits – use the database help button to discover the unique features of each database.
For example, you could limit to:

Search 1: ____________________ AND _______________ AND __________________

Search 2: ____________________ AND _______________ AND __________________

Search 3: ____________________ AND _______________ AND __________________

Search 4: ____________________ OR _______________ ) AND________________

Search 5: ____________________OR _______________ ) AND________________

Search 6: ____________________ OR _______________ ) AND________________
**Date range:** Last 5 years? / Last 10 years? / All?
**Type of source:** Newspaper articles, magazines articles, scholarly journals, multimedia
**Text coverage:** Full-text/citation and abstracts only
**Acceptable sources:** Peer-Reviewed? / Evidence-based?
**Geographical coverage:** United States? / International?

**Step 7:** Repeat your searches in a range of databases and keep a record of your results.

If you are not finding what you want, try these ideas:
- Double-check your spelling of each term.
- Use the advanced search to help correctly construct a Boolean Operator search.
- Use fewer terms
- Try a different database
- Use different terms. Look at the subject terms assigned to a useful article and search those instead.
- Ask a librarian or your instructor for assistance.