How to: Plan Your Search Strategy

Harrisburg Area Community College

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.”)
- Think of alternative keywords for each term (synonyms; broader or narrower terms; related concepts; alternative spellings).
- If you’re stuck, use Google to help find related words or phrases.

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Step 3: 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”
- Be prepared to revise your searches multiple times until you find the most successful ones.

Search 1: __________________________ AND ___________________________
Search 2: __________________________ AND ___________________________
Search 3: __________________________ OR ___________________________
Search 4: __________________________ OR ___________________________
Search 5: __________________________ NOT ___________________________

Step 4: Choose databases to search

Databases are collections of articles that can be searched all at once. They 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.

To find them:

1. Go to the library database website: [http://libguides.hacc.edu/databases](http://libguides.hacc.edu/databases)
2. Select one of the databases to search depending on your research goals.

- **General research**: EBSCOhost, Academic Search Complete, ProQuest
- **Controversial issues**: CQ Researcher, Opposing Viewpoints (Gale)
- **Career research**: Ferguson’s Career Guidance Center
- **Newspaper articles**: EBSCOhost (*Newspaper Source*), ProQuest (*New York Times, Courier-Journal*)

3. Subject specific databases are also available for topics such as Education, Humanities, Allied Health & Nursing, and more. To find these databases please visit [http://libguides.hacc.edu/databases/subject](http://libguides.hacc.edu/databases/subject)
Step 5: Consider the scope of your search

Some databases will allow you narrow your search results even further.

For example, you could limit to:

**Date range:** Last 5 years / Last 10 years / All

**Type of source:** Newspaper articles, magazines articles, scholarly journals, multimedia

**Text coverage:** Full-text / Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Articles

**Geographical coverage:** United States / International

Step 6: 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.

Questions? Contact a librarian! We are here to help YOU!

**In person:** Reference Desk of McCormick Library at HACC

**Phone:** (717) 780-2300

**Email:** ask@hacc.libanswers.com

**Chat:** [http://libanswers.hacc.edu/](http://libanswers.hacc.edu/)

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