Developing a search strategy: quick user guide

When conducting research into a new topic area it is really important to think about the way in which you search for information. An effective search strategy will save you time and can help to ensure that you don’t miss any key resources.

**Good planning will:**
- ensure you find the key material for your assignment/essay/dissertation
- be helpful when you find too much information, or not enough
- be helpful you when you don’t retrieve the results you expect
- improve the quality of your results
- save you time.

**Search strategy tips:**
The following process may be useful in formulating your search strategy:

1. Think about your research topic as a question or series of questions.
   For example: *Is there a proven relationship between video games and violent behaviour in children?*

2. Identify the keywords in your question.
   For example: *video games, violent behaviour, children*

3. Find synonyms (alternate terms) for each of your keywords. There may be many options.
   For example: *violent or aggressive or vicious or destructive* etc.
   The more synonyms you use the more comprehensive your search.

4. Use quotation marks to search for phrases.
   For example: *“video games”*

5. Apply truncation (often an asterisk *) at the end of a word to find variant endings and increase the number of matching items.
   For example: *child* would find *child, children* and *childhood* etc.

   Apply wildcards (often a question mark ? or $) to replace any single letter within a word to find variant spellings. For example: *behavio*r will find *behaviour* and *behavior*.

6. Apply proximity (e.g. NEAR/n) when there is a connection between your search terms and you need to find the terms near each other. For example, *video NEAR/2 games* finds results that contain the terms **within two words of one another**, such as video arcade games.

7. Combine the different elements of your search using **AND/OR/NOT**:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AND</th>
<th>OR</th>
<th>NOT (use with caution)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Each result contains all the search terms.</td>
<td>Each result contains at least one search term.</td>
<td>Results do not contain the specified terms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The search: “video games” AND violen* AND child* finds items that contain all three search terms.</td>
<td>The search: “video games” OR “PC games” finds items that contain either search term.</td>
<td>The search: “video games” NOT “educational games” finds items that contain video games but removes those that contain educational games.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8. Use **brackets** to bring together all the aspects of your topic into a concise search statement.

For example: `(((video* near/2 gam*) OR (computer* near/2 gam*) OR (PC near/2 game*) OR (Internet near/2 game*) OR (web near/2 game*)) AND (behavioSr OR violen*OR aggressi*)) AND (child* OR adolescen* OR youth* OR teenager* OR boy* OR girl*))`

Many of the bibliographic databases use search grids which make combining the different aspects of your topic much more straightforward. Below you can see our example search transferred into a search grid on the database Web of Science (on Web of Knowledge):

```
Web of Science®

Search

Search:

((video* near/2 gam*) OR (computer* near/2 gam*) OR (PC near/2 game*) OR (Internet near/2 game*) OR (web near/2 game*)) AND (behavioSr OR violen*OR aggressi*)) AND (child* OR adolescen* OR youth* OR teenager* OR boy* OR girl*))
```

The keywords for each element of the search are added into the three text boxes with the word “or” used to separate the different alternate terms. These terms are then combined using the “AND” option shown in the drop down menus on the left.

**Bibliographic databases for Sociology**

Bibliographic databases contain lists of references to all of the research that has been published across a broad subject area and are a vital source of information when conducting research.

The University Library subscribes to a large number of databases; these are all accessible via the [E-resources Guide](http://subjectguides.york.ac.uk/e-resources). You will need your University IT Services username and password to log in. The following databases are particularly relevant to Sociology:

- **Web of Science** (on the Web of Knowledge) provides access to a number of databases giving abstracts for journal articles and conference proceedings, plus cited references and current awareness alerts. Databases of relevance to sociology include: Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) and Conference Proceedings Citation Index– Social Science & Humanities (CPCI-SSH).

- **Criminal Justice Abstracts** aims to provide comprehensive coverage of the major journals in criminology and related disciplines, extensive coverage of books, and access to some reports from government and non-governmental agencies.

- **Nexis UK** is a major full text database for global news and business information. It gives access to over 35,000 sources, with more than 12,000 international news sources including UK daily and regional newspapers, and company information for over 100 million companies worldwide.

---

The Library offers an Interlending service to obtain items from other institutions, if we do not hold them at York. Please see the Library website for more information. For more help with searching, contact Lindsey Myers, Sociology Librarian, lindsey.myers@york.ac.uk