Search Tips: a brief guide to effective searching

Step 1: Select appropriate resources

Ask yourself….

a. What type of information am I looking for?
   - **Books** – useful for giving a broad overview of a subject;
   - **Journal articles** – an invaluable resource for researchers. Articles are a source of up-to-date, in-depth scholarly information;
   - **Statistics** – up to date official statistics are a useful way to illustrate a point.
   - **Official publications** - such as reports from government departments, bills, command papers and Acts of Parliament – provide information on government policy, legislation and proposed legislation.
   - **News** – newspaper information can be biased and sometimes incorrect but is useful for current issues or breaking news.

b. Which resources are most likely to contain the type of information I am looking for?
   - A **Library catalogue**, such as *iFind* will help you locate reference books and books for borrowing and also theses written by former Swansea University post-graduate students.
   - A **bibliographic database** such as *CINAHL* or *ASSIA* will help you identify articles in Human and Health Sciences journals.
   - The **Office for National Statistics website** will help you find up-to-date statistics for the UK.
   - **Times Digital Archive** and **Nexis UK** are newspaper databases.

c. What resources are available to Swansea University students?
   Go to [libguides.swansea.ac.uk](http://libguides.swansea.ac.uk) and then choose your subject. You will then see a list of relevant resources for your subject area.
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Step 2: Devise a search strategy
- Think about your research topic and clarify your ideas. Think about geographical and time limits – Global/Europe/UK/Wales? ; 20\textsuperscript{th} century/last decade/last month?
- Divide your topic into concepts. For example if your research topic was “Support for families with problems in the UK, specifically Wales” your concepts would be:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept 1</th>
<th>Concept 2</th>
<th>Concept 3</th>
<th>Concept 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>problems</td>
<td>families</td>
<td>support</td>
<td>UK, Wales</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For each concept think of broader and narrower terms, synonyms and alternative spellings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept 1</th>
<th>Concept 2</th>
<th>Concept 3</th>
<th>Concept 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>conflict</td>
<td>parents</td>
<td>intervention</td>
<td>UK / GB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dysfunction</td>
<td>homes</td>
<td>conflict resolution</td>
<td>Wales/ Welsh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>disruption</td>
<td>children</td>
<td>parent training</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>domestic violence</td>
<td>siblings</td>
<td></td>
<td>Great Britain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alcoholism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drug abuse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>illness</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Step 3: Searching on a database: some general principles
- Use one of our Database guides if possible or use Online help.
- Most searchable databases share some common features but there are differences.
- Use Boolean operators (AND ; OR ; NOT) to link your search terms eg.
  - problems and families and support will only find results which contain all three words. AND will narrow your search.
  - conflict or dysfunction or problems will find results which contain one of these three words. OR will broaden your search.
  - Wales not Australia will find results about Wales but not about New South Wales (hopefully). NOT will exclude a term from your search.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aim</th>
<th>Boolean Operator</th>
<th>Search Examples</th>
<th>Retrieval Formula</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To narrow your search results</td>
<td>AND</td>
<td>problems AND families</td>
<td>Only retrieves records containing all terms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>dysfunction AND child*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>conflict AND homes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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| To broaden your search results | OR | conflict OR problems  
|                               |    | intervention OR conflict resolution  
|                               |    | children OR siblings  
|                               |    | UK OR United Kingdom OR Great Britain  

Retrieves records containing either one or more terms

| To exclude a term from your search | NOT | Wales NOT Australia  
|                                   |    | sibling* NOT twins  

Excludes records containing the second term

- Many databases have a truncation symbol (usually an asterisk *) to pick up plurals and so on, e.g. child* will pick up children, childhood, childlike etc.

- Many databases have a wildcard symbol (usually a ?) to represent one or more characters in the middle of a word e.g. wom?n will find woman and women.

- Use inverted commas (“ ”) when searching for a phrase, e.g. “united nations”.

- Some databases are created in the USA so be aware of American spellings and terminology e.g. organisation/organization; behavior/behaviour; labor/labour. Using the wildcard symbol (?) will help with your search, for example behavio?r will find both spellings – behavior and behaviour.

- Some databases (such as ASSIA) have an in-built thesaurus. Check it out to make sure you’ve identified all the best “descriptor” terms for your topic. For example the descriptor term “intercountry adoption” will retrieve 100s of article references, but the term “overseas adoption” which a user may first think of, will only retrieve a handful.

### Further help

Your librarians are always happy to help either by phone, email or in person. If your enquiry is complicated it may be a good idea to make an appointment, you can do this using the online booking form on your Library Guides pages.

Contact us by our team email address: chhslibrary@swansea.ac.uk or medlib@swansea.ac.uk or team phone number 01792 602240.

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