Developing a Search Strategy to Conduct Research

Before you can search for any information, you should first develop a search strategy.

What is a Search Strategy?

A search strategy is a plan that helps you look for the information you need.

Search Strategy Tips

- Identify the key concepts.
- Determine alternative terms/synonyms for these concepts, if needed.
- Refine your search to dates, publication type, etc., as appropriate.
- Practice helps.

Getting Started

Brainstorm synonyms for your concept or topic. Searching for alternative words improves your chances of success. (Example: eating disorders, anorexia)

Modify your searches based on your results. If you find articles that reflect your interests or topic, redo your search using words that appear in the title, subject headings, abstract, or full text of that article.

Searching

When looking for articles try to narrow down your topic.

For Example:

- First search the terms body image AND college students as keywords. The results returned will have the keywords body image AND college students somewhere in the record.
- Look for the hyperlinked subject terms to lead you to more items with this same topic; for example self concept is a subject term (controlled vocabulary supplied by database).
- The result should be more specific articles on your topic, with less searching.

Additionally, combine keywords with AND, OR:

- body image AND college students --> Narrows Results (Reduces the number of search results by requiring all of the terms to appear in the same article)
- body image OR self-concept--> Broadens Results (Expands the number of search results by expanding the possible matches to include either one or the other term or both)
Phrase Searching

When multiple words are placed in a single search box, a database search engine will do one of two things. By default, the search engine will either:

1) Search for those words as a phrase. Meaning it will search for them side-by-side, next to each other and in that exact order ONLY

Or

2) Automatically place an implied Boolean ‘AND’ between the words and search for each word separately. It will retrieve only articles that contain both words, including those that are next to each other ... but in addition it will also retrieve articles where the words are found separately in different places within the article.

If you are unsure of the default of the database you are searching use double quotation marks for "phrase searching" and place a Boolean 'AND' between words if you wish to search for them separately.

Putting it all together...

- Put it all together to make a sophisticated search:
  ("college students" OR "university students") AND ( "body image" OR "self-concept")

Tip: Remember, Boolean search logic is algebraic in nature. Search proceeds in exact order, unless terms are nested. When using a simple one-box search, use parentheses to nest; when using advanced search (multiple boxes), items within each box are automatically nested.