

# The search itself

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This page helps you select a database type and to create or adapt your search.

## CHOOSE the database

- For an assignment, the database(s) may be specified.
- Otherwise, use the subject guides or seek *subject librarian* help — especially for major projects.

## USE the *problem statement* or *research question*

Recall that the *Problem Statement* is a simple sentence stating the essence of what you wish to research; when in the form a question, it is called the *Research Question*.

Adapt your search terms to the strengths or features of the chosen database:

### Natural Language databases

Some databases (eg, SciFinder) use "natural language" — just paste in your research question.

### Indexes (databases that are not full-text)

Split your problem statement into its key words/phrases and use *reasonable* alternatives for each

eg: addiction ↔ withdrawal ↔ dependence ; coffee ↔ caffeine

Then do an appropriate Boolean search.

### Full-text databases

Most permit searching for an exact phrase *anywhere* in the text — very useful!

### Specialist databases

... may have tools or codes (eg: MSC, CAS number, etc) that make it easier to find relevant results faster. Spending the effort learning how to use such tools often saves time in the long run.

### Multidisciplinary databases

... are still highly useful for finding subject-specific results — eg, [Scopus](#), which is large, fairly intuitive, with modern features including easy full-text links.

### Citation databases

Citation searching complements traditional keyword or subject search techniques. From sources or authors known to be crucial to your research, you may find later items based on those sources/authors or that comment on the original research.

## For each database you search with

- Use its special features to minimise your efforts, for example:
  - Sorting the results by relevance.
  - Specialist subject codes (eg, MSC) or subject headings (eg, MeSH).
  - A thesaurus, or even a "tree" of subject headings
  - Subject mapping.
  - Automatic searching of alternative spellings, plurals, related words, etc.
  - Adjacency or proximity operators —eg, NEAR, WITHIN, ...
  - Can you save your search — eg, to re-run or edit later.
  - Easy editing or refining an existing search.
  - The options to combine different searches.
  - "Find similar results" options.
  - Creating alerts for ongoing projects.
- Be wary of ambiguous words/terms with different meanings in different searches/disciplines.
- Review the first search results, especially anything labelled "Descriptors" or "keywords". Are there some other terms here that would benefit your search?
- Can you save the results? Maybe download their full-text directly?
- Keep a record of your search — you may need to edit it later!

## Your time is important. Concentrate on finding RELEVANT results!

- A good search saves the time and effort you would waste evaluating results from inferior searches.
- Evaluate your results and **prioritise** your reading.
- Allow time for more searching later — a good result might prompt new, relevant areas to research.

## When good databases go bad

- Databases and catalogues often change, sometimes for the better.
- Is a resource malfunctioning? Please report it or contact your Subject Librarian.
- If in doubt, read the online help ... but be aware it may be too generic or out of date.
- Adjust your search to the "grammar" of the database.
- Contact your Subject Librarian for help — especially if you have too many results, or too few!
- Sometimes you should not be *too* precise; perhaps consider related or broader concepts as well.

See your Subject Librarian for specific advice or help on databases

See also

*PAGE 1 (Topic, Context, & Your Treatment)*

*PAGE 3 (Evaluating the search results)*