# Constructing a Search Strategy

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## Search strategy??

We use a health care database to look for health care evidence for research, essays or assignments.

To get results (hopefully good ones) out of the database, we put words in.

The words we choose and the way we enter them is called the search strategy.

If you want to know more about databases and why we use them, watch the What is a database? guide.

## Before we start

There is no such thing as a perfect search

No two people ever come up with the same set of search terms for the same topic (even librarians)

No matter how good your search terms, you will always get some results that aren’t relevant to your question

## Support Sheet

If you want to work through the following steps with your own topic, you can use our Constructing a search strategy support sheet.

Copies are available on the Library Health and Social Work subject pages in our How to… Guides section

## Step 1: Define your topic

As an example, we’ll use the following topic, but the same technique can be used for anything you need to find evidence on.

You notice that many of your colleagues are not adhering to correct hand washing techniques.

You decide to look at the evidence to see why there is non-compliance to help you decide what action you should take.

You may want to think about the question you would write using PICOT

## Step 2: Choose your keywords

Ask yourself…

What key things do I need in every article to make it relevant to me?

You may well have picked out

Non-compliance

handwashing

## Step 2: Choose your keywords

You might have lots of keywords, but you don’t necessarily need to search on them all.

If you have a particularly niche topic where there are very few articles written

e.g. body image after tracheostomy

then a couple of keywords may be all you need

With a huge topic with lots of research

e.g. sepsis

Then you’ll need to narrow your search with additional terms such as an intervention or patient group

## Step 3: Identify alternative terminology

Think about the alternative words authors might be using to describe the same thing.

The database only searches on exactly what you put in, it doesn’t anticipate alternative spellings, synonyms or know your context.

hand washing

– hand wash, hand sanitizer, hand hygiene, handwashing

Non-compliance

– compliance, adherence, barriers, obstacles, problems

## Step 3: Identify alternative terminology

Think about…

Plurals – adult or adults

Hyphenated words - End of life or end-of-life

Abbreviations - HIV or human immunodeficiency virus

American terminology - patient hand off or patient hand over

American spellings - Immunisation or immunization

## Step 3: Identify alternative terminology

You can use truncation (\*) and wildcards (?) to help cut down on the number of terms you have to type into the database but still get it to search for all of your alternatives.

e.g. child\* will search for child or children

e.g. immuni?ation will search for immunization or immunisation

Watch our Truncation and Wildcards tutorial for more details about what you can use and when.

Alternative terms can be a phrase with more than one word…

## Phrase searching

If you’re sure you want 2 or more words together and in that order, you can use speech marks to keep them together.

In our example search we could do this with the ‘hand’ terms

“hand wash\*”, “hand hygiene”, “hand sanitizer\*”

However

You must be certain that the words wouldn’t be useful to you if they were reversed or had another word between them

e.g. “time manag\*” won’t find “manag\* time”

You must use the “ (shift and 2 on most keyboards) an apostrophe won’t do the same thing

## Step 4: Combining your keywords

When you put them into the database, you enter an OR between any words which mean the same thing

“Hand hygiene” OR “hand sanitizer\*” OR handwash\* OR “hand wash\*”

When you need the article to contain both sets of words, link the sets together with AND

“Hand hygiene” OR “hand sanitizer\*” OR handwash\* OR “hand wash\*”

AND

Compliance OR non-compliance OR adher\* OR barrier\* OR obstacle\* OR problem\*

For more on when to use AND and OR and why, look at our When to use AND and OR guide.

## Try it out

If you’ve followed these steps through, you’ll have a search strategy ready to use on one of the health care databases

Hint: I’d try it out on CINAHL first – see the Searching using CINAHL guide

The list of health care databases you can choose from is on the Library Health and Social Work subject pages

## Further help

If you’re wondering what the \* means, then you can look at our guide Truncation and Wildcards

For more help with what AND and OR mean and when to use them look at our When to use AND or OR guide

If you’re having trouble using AND and OR on a particular database, look at the database specific guide on our Library How to… guides pages

If you have questions you’d like to ask a librarian…

## Any Questions?

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Ask for help if you need it.