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Advanced Database Searching
for Health and Social Work

This guide shows some advanced database searching techniques you can use when looking for journal articles on particular topics. To use this guide you need to be familiar with basic database searching. See our *Basic Database Searching for Health and Social Work* guide for more information.

Limiting your search

You might want to put limits on your search results; if you are searching for specific dates or types of information, or if you are finding too many results with ordinary keyword searching.

Usually, your limiting options appear on screen to the left hand side of your results. Some will be simple tick boxes, while others may need you to click to open a new menu or add more options.

Most databases have a date limiting option, but may not have lots of other options.

Make sure you know what the limit is actually doing, e.g. geography limits typically look at where the research is published, rather than what country is being studied.

In some databases, once you have put limits on, they will stay on for all your searches until you take them off again, or log out. So after doing a search with particular limits, you need to clear them if you then want to do a search without limits on, or with different limits.

Subject Searching (using the thesaurus / MeSH)

Up until now, in both our *Basic Database Searching* guide and this guide, we have only looked at keyword searching i.e. looking for words which appear somewhere in the record e.g. the article title, journal title or the abstract. This means you had to think of as many possible words as you could which different authors might use to describe the same topic. For example, in the *Basic Database Searching* guide we looked at the topic of *interprofessional*, for which you could search for all the following keywords: *inter-professional, team work, multidisciplinary, multi-disciplinary* (and more!)

Many databases have what's known as a subject index or thesaurus, or MeSH Headings or topic trees, which enable you to search for all the articles on a particular topic without having to come up with all the possible keywords describing that topic yourself. This is because when an article reference is added to the database, someone indexes the reference and decides which of the pre-existing subject headings it fits under, regardless of what words the author has used to describe the topic.

Although you can sometimes choose to search more than one database at once, you cannot subject search or use the thesaurus in more than one database at once, because each database has a different thesaurus.

In British Nursing Database you search the thesaurus as follows:
- Click the Advanced Search link
- Click Thesaurus
- Click on British Nursing Index thesaurus – if you're ever given an option, choose the thesaurus specific to the database.
- Type in a word or words to look for subjects, e.g. *spiritual*
- Click on Find
- The database finds the nearest subject heading, e.g. *Spiritual care,* click on the link

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- Clicking on the page icon next to the heading gives you a definition of what British Nursing Database means by *Spiritual care*; in many databases this is known as a scope note
- Listed underneath the subject heading may be narrower, broader or related terms
- Choose the subject heading that most closely matches what you want to search for (e.g. *Spiritual care*), tick the box next to it and then click Add to search
- Sometimes you may wish to search on a subject heading and all the narrower sub-headings that are part of it, e.g. you may wish to search on the heading *Drug administration* and also on its narrower sub-headings *Injections* and *Intravenous therapy*. To include sub-headings, place a tick in the Explode box before clicking Add to search
- Your chosen subject heading will be displayed in the search box on the Advanced search screen; click Search to search for articles

Subject searching may come up with more results for your topic than keyword searching, or it may come up with fewer but more focused results.

Just like keyword searching, you can combine subject searches for different aspects of a topic by using your database's Search History facility if it has one; for example, in British Nursing Database you could search in the Thesaurus for *Spiritual Care*, then search again in the Thesaurus for *Dementia*, and then combine those two searches by clicking the Recent searches link.

Sometimes if you type in a subject search you will be directed to a different heading; for example, in British Nursing Database if you type *critical care* into the Thesaurus you will be directed to *intensive care* instead. Sometimes nothing comes up for your subject search at all – in which case you need to think of another term which might describe the subject and try searching for that.

Subject searching is accessed differently or called different things in different databases e.g. in CINAHL the thesaurus is called CINAHL Headings and in PubMed (Medline) and Cochrane, it's called the MeSH Database or MeSH Search. Email us or follow the Help links to find out more information.

Saving and re-running searches

If you are working on a long project, such as a dissertation, you will want to check from time to time that nothing new on your topic has been added to the databases you have searched. You may want to go back to a particular database several times over a few months and repeat a search exactly as you did it before. In many databases you can save a search to rerun at a future date.

You'll first need to set up an account on the database. Although the account is called by different names, the option is always up in the top right hand corner of the screen. It's always free and you can use any usernames/email addresses as it's not linked to Brookes.

Once you have an account you can save e.g. in CINAHL or PsycInfo you can save the search history by clicking Save Searches/Alerts which appears above the search history box. If you want to save a link to individual articles, click the folder icon next to each one.

Most of the Health and Social Work databases provide options for saving your search. The Help links on those databases provide full instructions on how to save searches.

Search alerts

As part of the save option on some databases, you can ask the database to email you whenever new article references which match your particular search strategy are added to the database. You can choose the frequency they are sent and you can go in and stop them at any time.

Searching in specific fields

Each article reference (record) on a database like British Nursing Database or CINAHL is divided into various bits of information called "fields" – for example, the Author field, Title field, Source (journal title) field and so on. You may want to be able to look for information in specific fields. For example, you might want to search for a particular author's name (in the Author field) or look for particular words in just the abstracts of articles (in the Abstract field). *For example:* in CINAHL Advanced Search (the default search screen) you can Select a Field – click the arrow to select from a drop down menu fields such as

Title, Author and Abstract. If you select Title, and then put your keywords in the Search box and click Search, the database will look for those words in just the article title, rather than anywhere in the reference – this will narrow down your search and give more focused results, but may well mean you miss some relevant references which don't mention your search words in their titles.

Searching in multiple fields

Many databases will let you search for specific bits of information in several fields at a time. This can be useful if you want to search for articles on a particular topic that are in one particular journal, or articles with particular words in their titles that are by one specific author. *For example:* if you were trying to track down an article about dementia from the *Journal of Interprofessional Care*:

- In PsycINFO, go to Advanced Search
- In the first box type *dementia*
- In the first Select a Field box, select *Title*
- In the second box type *interprofessional*
- In the second Select a Field box, select *Publication Name*

This will find any articles with the word *dementia* in their titles that come from a journal with the word *interprofessional* in the journal title.

How do I get more help?

If you're having problems that this guide doesn't cover, you can:

- Look at our guide to *Basic Database Searching* on the Library's Health and Social Work web pages
- Check our web pages for upcoming training sessions and help sessions
- Email healthcarelibrarians@brookes.ac.uk for more help