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Basic Database Searching
for Health and Social Work

When working on your assignments, you will usually need to go beyond your reading list and find your own research on a particular topic.

What is your topic?
Make sure that your topic is not too broad or too specific. It is often useful to read books on your topic first to get an idea of specific themes that you could focus your research on. As an example, we are going to use the topic: *Examine the importance of good interprofessional communication in the community setting*.

You can use the *Constructing a search strategy* support sheet to guide you through the steps below.

What are your keywords?
Once you have a focused topic you will need to pick out your keywords, which you will use to search for relevant information. Make sure that you select the most important words from your topic. Don't worry if you don't have a complete question at this stage, think about your topic and ask things like who, what and where to help you identify key things to search on.

We will use: *Interprofessional, Communication, Community*.

The importance of synonyms, alternative terminology and spellings:
Once you have selected your keywords, it is important to think about synonyms (other words that mean the same thing) because different authors use different words to describe the same subject. If you don't consider alternative terms, you may miss some relevant information. Make sure you think about things like English and American spellings, plurals and acronyms.

Truncation and Wildcards are two symbols you can use in databases to save you writing out every variation and can help you find alternative spellings or word endings and to broaden your search.

Truncation is represented by the star symbol (*) and you can use it to find different word endings. For example: Child* will find Child, Children and Childhood, etc.

Wildcard is represented by the question mark symbol (?) and you can use it to find English/American spellings. Organi?ation will find Organisation and Organization.

- Some databases, e.g. PubMed, don't support the wildcard
- Sometimes the database will only look for alternatives where there is a character in the place of the ?, e.g. p?ediatric will find paediatric, but won't find pediatric
- You can't use a wildcard to find a hyphenated version e.g. well?being won't find well-being.

Here are some possible synonyms for our topic:

Interprofessional	Communicat*	Communit*
Interprofessional	Social skill*	Societ*
Inter-professional	Liaison	Primary care

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Phrase searching

If you want to find two or more words together and in order, you can tell the database to do this using "".

In our example search, primary care would be worth considering as a phrase.

If we search on primary care, an irrelevant article mentioning *primary* school age children in the title, asking in the abstract whose *care* responsibility it is to ensure they receive adequate sun protection, would appear in our results list. If we put in "primary care", this article wouldn't come up as the words don't appear together and in that order.

If you are going to use a phrase search, be sure that the alternative word order wouldn't also be useful to you, e.g. If you were to say "time manag*", would you still be interested in an article talking about ways to manag* time?

Building Blocks - Boolean Operators

Once you have found all of your alternative terms, you will need to use Boolean Operators to join the search terms together.

OR

Use OR to broaden your search out and to find all the research which mentions ANY of your synonyms/ alternative terms.

AND

Use AND to narrow your search and to locate research which focuses on the main elements/keywords of your topic.

Our Search Strategy

Inter-professional **OR** Interprofessional
AND
Communicat***** **OR** Social skill***** **OR** Liaison
AND
Communit***** **OR** Societ***** **OR** "primary care"

Systematic searching

Remember, it's important that you run the same search on each database that you use. You could try copying and pasting from one database, or a word document. This saves you time and also ensures that you are being as systematic as possible as you are not running the risk of accidentally typing in the wrong word or spelling.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria (limits)

It is important that you think about what research you want to include and exclude. This is particularly important if you have a broad topic. Some of the most common limits are

Age Group (Child, Teenager, Elderly)
Setting (Hospital, Community)
Publication Year
Publication Type (Systematic reviews, Qualitative research, RCTs)

What are databases?

Databases are indexes to thousands of journal articles, systematic reviews and reports. They are the main resource that you should use to find research on a particular topic. Unlike searching on Google, where you cannot always be sure how reliable the information you are getting is, research on the health care databases has been quality checked, so you can be assured that it is accurate, reliable and current and health care focused.

Which databases should I use?

Listed below are the main databases for each subject area. However, there are many more. All are accessible on the subject help web pages.

Nursing: BND, CINAHL, PubMed
Allied Health: AMED, CINAHL, PubMed
Mental Health: PsycINFO
**Social Work:** Social Services Abstracts
Evidence Based: Cochrane

How do I search the databases?

Although many of the databases look different to each other, the process of searching them is very similar. Search for each aspect of your topic, like individual building blocks of a search, and then use the **Search History** function to combine them:

- Do a search for: *Inter-professional **OR** Interprofessional*
- Do another search for: *Communicat* **OR** Social skill* **OR** Liaison*
- Do another search for: *Communit* **OR** Societ* **OR** "primary care"*
- Go to your **Search History** (in some databases this is under **Recent Searches**)
- Combine your three searches (they will be numbered, e.g. #1 and #2 and #3). Some databases have a "Combine with AND" button to do this, or you can type in a new search, e.g. #1 AND #2 AND #3
- This will create a new search (should be **#4)** with far fewer results than either #1 or #2 or #3, all of which should have all aspects of your search in them.

I've found some results that look good: now what do I do?

- The database won't always give you the whole article
- Each result will include the article's author(s), article title, and what journal it is from, with the volume, issue and page numbers, like this:
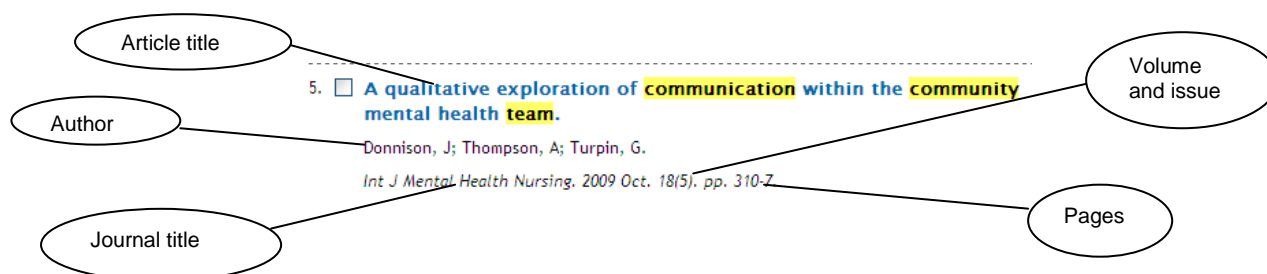
- Clicking the article title will usually take you to a page with more information about that article and perhaps a longer abstract.
- Many databases also have links which will take you through to the full text of an article if it's available through Brookes
- If your chosen database doesn't have full text links, you can always look for the title of the journal (not the article) and search for this in the main search box on the Library homepage using the 'Journal titles' search option

I've retrieved nothing: what do I do?

- Check for spelling errors
- Check you have not put in an AND when you should have used OR
- Think about whether your topic is too specific
- Think about whether there are more alternative keywords you could use for any aspects of your search strategy
- Think about whether you are using the most appropriate databases for your topic

I've retrieved far too many results: what do I do?

- Check you have not put in an OR when you should have used AND
- Think about whether your topic is too broad and see if you can make it more specific
- Try searching for your keywords just in the abstract of articles to focus the search further
- For tips on subject/thesaurus searching and ways to limit your search, look at our guide to *Advanced Database Searching*

Managing your results

If you have a reasonable number of hits and lots of them are relevant, you will probably not be able to narrow down any more without losing relevant material. Work through your results and:

- Select the ones you think are most useful. Most databases have buttons to tick next to each result you want, to make a list or add them to a folder
- Print, save or email the results you have ticked – most databases have buttons for this
- Save your search on the database so that you can re-run it later. The guide to *Advanced Database Searching* can help with this

The Library hasn't got some of the journals that I want

If you have checked and are sure we do not have the journal you want, you can still get hold of it:

- Interlibrary Loan – you pay £3 and the Library gets a copy of the article from another library for you. There is a form to fill in on our web pages at http://www.brookes.ac.uk/library/library-services/borrowing/interlibrary-loans-service/
- Visiting another library – the journal you need may be available at a local Health Care library such as the Cairns Library at the John Radcliffe Hospital. You need to apply for access to these libraries. For more information on how to do this, see Other Health Care Libraries

How do I get more help?

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

- Look at our guide to *Advanced 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