# Too many results? (ways to narrow your search)

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## How many is too many?

Everyone has their own idea of how many results is too many results to look through on a database.

If you are just looking for a couple of good articles or an article to support a point which you are making in an essay, then it doesn’t really matter how many results you get in total as long as there’s a useful one near the top of the list.

Databases tend to display results in date order – newest first - so go from the top of the list to find the latest evidence.

However, if you’re doing a search for a dissertation, then it’s really important that you get a manageable number of results so that you can assess each result against your inclusion/exclusion criteria.

My guide maximum number of results is 200. I’m looking for 200 or less on each database.

## Look at your search results

Whenever you do a search, however many results you are getting, look at the first few results and see what’s coming up.

Are you getting lots of irrelevant results?

If so, is one of your terms to blame?

Some of the databases will highlight in bold which of your search terms they have found in each article. This is useful as you can look at an irrelevant record and see why it’s appeared in your results list.

## Remove a search term

I searched for a set of terms designed to look for everything on the database about what knowledge nurses had gained from their degree course

train\* OR educat\* OR course\* OR teach\* OR knowledge

However, knowledge always came up in articles about the ‘current state of knowledge’ on a topic.

So I removed it. There were less results, and the results were much more relevant.

If you’re developing a search in CINAHL or PsycInfo then you can just click edit at the end of the line in search history, delete the term, click save and it will automatically update your results.

## Add in an additional search line

Think again about what keywords you are including.

If I search for

Anxiet\* OR anxious\* OR worry OR worries OR fear\*

AND

Surgery OR surgical OR operation OR preoperative

I’ll get articles about any patient of any age being fearful before surgery.

If I’m particularly interested in young children, adding the following with AND

Child\* OR paediatric OR pediatric

Would only give me articles where children were mentioned, so I’d have less results to go through, but more of them would be on my topic.

## Change where you’re looking

Usually, when I look on a database, I leave the setting on the default search option.

It’s easy – I don’t have to alter anything or find a different option for each database

It gives me the biggest number of results – if there isn’t much out there I should find it; I should find everything.

But if you’re getting too many results, you could choose to limit where within the article record you look for your terms.

## Changing the field (Not that kind of field)

Each piece of information in a database record is known as a field. There’s usually an author field, title field, abstract field.

So you can choose to search only in the abstract for your terms if you want to.

The option is usually a drop down list

near the search box.

Just be aware that you might then miss useful articles, exactly on your topic, which don’t have an abstract on the database.

## Try using the Thesaurus

Often, words can mean several different things depending on context, so it may be that you need that term because useful articles mention it, but it can also appear in lots of irrelevant articles too.

Home is one example.

I might be looking for an article about care received by people in their own homes. But the word home will appear in every article talking about a nursing home, or a care home.

One potential solution for this is to look only for articles indexed on the database under the subject of home environment.

Our guide to Thesaurus searching will show you how to do this.

## Further help

For more help with forming a search strategy look at the Constructing a Search Strategy guide

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 and OR guide

If want to try your search on different databases, look at the database specific guides on our 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.