



Site-Seeing Advice Card: Devising a search strategy

Resource Guide for the Social Sciences

Devising a search strategy

The process of planning a search strategy clarifies your thinking about your topic and helps ensure that you are looking for information appropriate to your task. Taking a few minutes to plan before you begin searching will save you time once you start exploring the resource of your choice.

Before you search: Search terms/expressions

1. Think about your topic or area of interest and ask yourself questions to clarify your ideas. For example, if you are looking for information about racism, ask yourself relevant questions such as:

- What particular aspect of racism am I interested in?

For example: racial equality/causes of racism/attitudes to racial groups/racism towards particular ethnic groups etc

- Am I interested in racism from a particular perspective?

For example: historical, psychological, sociological

2. Define your topic in one phrase eg racial attitudes in employment
3. Split your phrase into concepts:

Concept 1

racial

Concept 2

attitudes

Concept 3

employment

4. For each concept, make a list of alternative terms that could also be used to describe the concept:

Concept 1

racial

ethnic

Concept 2

attitudes

beliefs

prejudice

Concept 3

employment

work

Because many of the resources include international coverage ensure you consider:

- Differences in spelling for different nationalities eg American English
- The terms used to describe the concept in your and other (if appropriate) discipline areas

NOTE: You may like to list forms of the same word eg attitude, attitudes, attitudinal etc although many resources will allow you to use a symbol (eg an asterisk) to indicate that you want your search term interpreted as any word containing the root of that word.

For example using *attitud** would ensure terms such as attitudinal were included in your search expression in those resources which support this form of truncation.

5. Select your resource according to its suitability for the task at hand.

turn over



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Gaining worthwhile results

WARNING: Most searchable resources share some basic characteristics, however, each may operate in its own unique way. There is no standard method by which searchable resources interpret your search terms/expressions, Boolean connectors etc. For this reason, it is important to utilise any online help facilities when using a resource for the first time (or revisiting after a period of time).

Gaining worthwhile results may ultimately depend on how you make use of your search terms/expressions in conjunction with the particular search features offered by the resource.

Performing an initial search

It may be helpful to use no more than two of your search concepts when performing your initial search as this can provide a useful starting point from which you can assess how to proceed.

The following may assist in yielding the type of information you are seeking:

- Review the results from your initial search to determine whether your search terms/expression yield the desired information
- Refer back to your concepts and search terms
- Make any appropriate changes to your search terms/expressions for example:
 - Use synonyms to replace any terms that are causing unwanted results
 - Add or remove one of your concepts
 - Widen or narrow your search by using the features offered by the resource (consult the help)
 - Consult the online help for general searching advice
- Be methodical. Recording your search terms/expressions as you progress may help you focus

Common search features

Feature	Purpose	Example	Outcome
truncation	to indicate missing letter/s so that your search term is interpreted as any word containing the letters you have specified	attitud* (Other symbols may be used for truncation. Always check the online help)	yields results containing words such as attitudinal, attitude, attitudes etc
Limiting search fields	to control your search results by specifying field parameters eg language	(limit to) English	yields results that contain items written only in English

Boolean connectors

Sometimes referred to as logical operators these allow you to specify how you would like the resource to use the terms when interpreting your search expression.

Connector	Notation used	Example	Outcome
AND	various-check the help	racial AND attitudes	Results contain both terms
OR	various-check the help	racial OR attitudes	Results contain either term ie they only have to contain one of these terms
NOT	various-check the help	racial NOT attitudes	Results contain racial but not attitudes

Some resources also feature a thesaurus which contains the terms (and their meanings) as used by the resource.

NOTE: Always ensure you know what features are available and how they are represented (especially Boolean connectors). Appearances can be deceiving, assume nothing and use the online help!