



Steps to Online Searching

Note: These steps are not necessarily performed in the following exact order but "interactively," as you revise your strategies and adapt them to your search results. You may need to go back to some questions several times.

1. Identify the problem

- a. Can I state my information need in a clear question
- b. What type of information do I need? (Overview, scholarly, news, point of view, documents)
- c. How much information do I need? (term paper, essay, speech, definition)

2. Brainstorm keywords

- a. What are my major concepts?
- b. What synonyms, broader or narrower terms, or related ideas could I use?
- c. How will I link the keywords with Boolean operators (and, or, not)?
- d. Should I be concerned about plurals or other forms of words? (Are there truncation or wildcard features?)
- e. Are there any proper names (people or places) that would focus my search?
- f. Should I adjust my strategy for a full-text database?
- g. Is there a thesaurus or controlled vocabulary?
- h. Are some words meaningless in this database? (for example, "company" in a business database)
- i. Have I spelled everything correctly?

3. Subject vs. keyword search

- a. Do I have more than one concept to search?
- b. Am I browsing for a topic or looking for a way to narrow a broader topic?
- c. Can I spell all the vocabulary correctly?
- d. Can I search by field?

4. Select appropriate databases

- a. Does it cover my subject?
- b. Does it contain the formats I need to answer my questions? (newspapers, magazines, primary sources, encyclopedia)
- c. Are there abstracts that help me decide if the text will be useful?
- d. Does it cover the time period I am interested in?
- e. Can I understand the information contained in it? (If I can't understand the abstracts, the full text may be even tougher!)
- f. Is it full text? If not, can I access the materials it indexes through interlibrary loans, other libraries, or fax?

5. Refine the search online (Searching is an interactive process!)

- a. Are my hits relevant, readable, accessible?
- b. Have I used all the strategies I planned to use?
- c. Have I tried different combinations of keywords?
- d. Should I use broader or narrower terms?

- e. Have I examined the most promising hits for better vocabulary (especially in the "subject" or "descriptor" fields)?
- f. Did I spell my search terms correctly?
- g. Do I need to ask the library information specialist for advice?
- h. Should I try another database?
- i. Is my topic really not "doable"? Should I consider another?

6. Evaluate the search offline; examine that printout; ask, "What if?"

- a. How relevant were my hits?
- b. Which of the hits are the best? (most relevant, timely, credible, readable, available, and promote the point of view I support)
- c. Which of my strategies worked best?
- d. Should I try them in another database?
- e. Are there additional keyword clues in my printout?
- f. Did I select the best possible databases?
- g. What is my next step?