

How to Choose Keywords

Need to conduct a search but don't know where to start? To search effectively, find the keywords (which are the main ideas) for your research topic. Why? Most search tools don't understand natural language (i.e. sentences), so searching with keywords can help you find articles on your topic. As an example, let's use the research question "Does social interaction reduce stress?" as a topic.

With this established, we can move onto the next step: identifying keywords, which are the main concepts or ideas - typically the nouns or verbs in your research topic. For our example topic, the main concepts are "social interaction" and "stress."

When selecting main topics, try to avoid relational words such as "affect," "reduce," or "impact."

While we may want articles that look at whether social interaction reduces stress, by including "reduce" in our search, we will bias our results. After all, it is not certain to us at this point whether social interaction reduces stress. We can only find this out after conducting our search and reading the literature. Therefore, it is best not to include relational words such as "reduce" as a main concept.

Having the main concepts "social interaction" and "stress," we may want to brainstorm synonyms and other like-terms to search. Similar terms allow us to expand our search because we are able to find other articles that refer to our concepts using different terms.

Some strategies to find similar terms include using:

- British vs. American spelling; for example: defense spelt with an "s" and defence spelt with a "c"
- Scientific vs. common names; for example: "acetylsalicylic acid" for "aspirin"
- Real-life examples of the concept; for example: "Toronto" for the concept "Canadian city," or "iPhone" for the concept "cellular device"

For example, a synonym of "stress" may be "distress" and synonyms of "social interaction" may include "socializing" and "socialization" in both the British and American spelling.

Once we have established synonyms for our concepts, we have our keywords and we're ready to start our search!