Sample Search Strategy

Hi, this is Pam Sukalski, Librarian at SMSU’s McFarland Library. In this video clip we’ll walk through an example of how a search strategy can be developed for your trends paper.

I am in the Ebsco MegaFile database. This is a general topic combined database as it includes Academic Search Premier, Business Source Premier, and Regional Business News all in one search. My field is education, so I would also want to target databases specific to that industry. For demonstration purposes, I am using one of the broad-coverage databases that everyone could utilize. The searching techniques being demonstrated will work in all databases.

At this point in your research, you should have identified 2-3 issues, trends, or topics that you want to research. These would have been identified through your interview, the career websites, and/or associations or organizations key to your industry. Trying searches such as education issues, marketing issues, food topics, or business trends in the database search box will not be effective. You need to be more specific and have a topic in mind before beginning your database searches.

For my example, I am researching the trend of ebooks in higher education and more specifically the impact or role of libraries in that arena. The first thing I need to do is think about keywords in my topic. I said ebooks, but that could also be spelled out into electronic books. Let’s look at how searching using each term impacts my results:

- Electronic books = 57,899 results
- Ebooks = 8418 results

In this example, you can see how different terms can greatly impact the number of results. Think about a variety of search terms you could use to describe your topic.

I need to narrow my results, and I’ll do that by adding additional search terms. I want to focus on ebooks in higher education. I have a few options: I could add either the term college or university (or both) into my search, or I could add a phrase search such as “higher education” – putting that phrase in quotes tells the database to search for those words next to each other. This eliminates results that may have the word higher in one area and the word education somewhere else. Phrase searching can be an effective narrowing tool when used correctly. Note that I also could have used a phrase search for my “electronic books” term.

While adding terms has helped narrow my results, I want to see if I can further focus by adding the library aspect of my research topic to my search strategy. I am going to use the truncation symbol – the asterisk * - when I add library to my search strategy. The truncation symbol tells the computer to look for words that have the same beginning of the word, but may have different endings. It’s important to place the * in the correct location. By adding the * at the end of library* I am telling the computer to find any results that begin l-i-b-r-a-r, but could have endings such as -y for library, -ies for libraries, and -ian for librarian. If I had put the * after the y in library* I would not have any alternative endings for the computer to locate. Another example would be psychol* which would leave the options open for finding
psychology, psychologists, psychological. Using the truncation symbol will broaden your search results, but it also helps you avoid missing relevant articles due to the variations of a word.

Ultimately my search strategy ended up as ebooks “higher education” librar* as I continued revising my search strategy and working to target my results. Now I would try that search in education-related databases, and revise as needed based on my results.

In this example, I was able to narrow my results based on words in my research topic. If your topic is broader than this, not well-defined, and/or you’re not certain how to focus your search, take a few minutes to look through the first couple of pages of results after your initial search. For example, if I wanted to research something to do with advertising and children, but am not sure what aspect of that I want to focus on, I could start with a broad search using truncation of advertis* child*. Using truncation for both of those words will make for a very broad search, but allows all results that include advertise, advertising, advertisements and child or children to be returned.

As I look for ways to narrow, I will skim through the first couple of pages of results. I’ll use the preview button to read the abstract (if available), and will be glancing through the subject headings to get ideas of additional search terms to use. For example, I might want to use the term “internet marketing,” or food, or psychological to my original search to begin narrowing my results. Note that if you click on an article title to see more information, the subjects listed here are hyperlinked. Be aware that clicking on those links eliminates your original search strategy and begins a whole new search. That is why I recommend you write down a few subject term ideas and add them to the search box. It’s especially important to pay attention to subject terms when you find an exceptional article. You can then use those terms in future searches to help target your results.

Note that while I chose to start broad in my original search of ebooks and in this advertising to children example, I also could have started my search with multiple search terms and then eliminated or changed terms as I searched. It really depends on your topic, and how comfortable you are searching the databases. Many times students will put 4-5 words in the search box and when very few hits are returned, they give up or assume there aren’t any articles on their topic. In those situations, it's better to start broad and gradually add search terms as you refine your topic and locate relevant articles.

If you need help with your search strategy, please contact a librarian.