Keyword Search Strategies for Library Databases

Keywords are any important words or phrases describing your topic. Keyword searches work in all library databases (for articles) and the Library Catalog (for books).

**Step 1: Define your topic.** HINT: Try to think of specific aspects of your topic that interest you. Broad, general topics are much harder to research and write about than small, focused topics.

*Broad Topic:* the civil rights movement
*Specific Topics:* Montgomery bus boycott, freedom rides, Greensboro Four

**Step 2: Think of keywords to** describe each concept involved in your topic. Think of more than one, in case your first choice does not work.

**Sample topic:** Does the death penalty unfairly target minorities?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept 1: death penalty</th>
<th>Concept 2: unfairly target minorities</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternative terms:</td>
<td>discrimination</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ethnic groups</td>
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<td></td>
<td>racism</td>
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<td>African American</td>
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<td></td>
<td>prejudice</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Hispanic etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>execution</td>
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**Step 3: Create a search statement.** Use Boolean operators to tell the computer whether you want to find all the words, any of the words, or if you want to exclude a word from your results. Here's a visual example of how this works:

- **AND** is the most important, because it helps you narrow your search. A good way to start a search: Choose your best keywords, then link them together with **AND**.

  *Sample search using our keywords form step 2: death penalty and racism*

  Other search tricks: Enclose exact phrases in quotation marks: "death penalty"

  Use a truncation symbol (usually *) to get multiple forms of a word. Example: rac* will retrieve race, racial, racism - but also racy, rack, and raceme.

**STEP 4: Evaluate your results.** Be choosy? An article or book can contain all your keywords but still not be useful.

If you get no results or too few results:
- Check your spelling. Misspelled words are a common search problem.
- Avoid typing long phrases or questions. Use only the most important words, and always separate them with **and**.
- Choose different keywords for your search.
  - For example, if your search was: death penalty and racism
  - Try these instead: capital punishment and racism
  - death penalty and discrimination

If you have any questions, please ask for assistance or call 881-2266

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