How to Formulate a Search Strategy

First, think through what you are looking for. What is your research topic? What kind of phrases and keywords would the ideal article have in it? Is your topic so broad that you'll retrieve thousands of articles? How can you narrow your topic? What related topics would be of interest to you?

Second, gather keywords. For example, I want to find articles on whether there is a relationship between being overweight and developing hypertension. I have two subjects that I am dealing with: (1) overweight and (2) hypertension.

Third, try the search. Here's how I would begin in CINAHL:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overweight or obes*</th>
<th>Select a Field (optional)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AND</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypertensi*</td>
<td>Select a Field (optional)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using the asterisk will retrieve variations of the keywords. Place the asterisk where the variation will begin. For example, if I want all the variations of the word obesity, I would put the asterisk after the 's': obes* so that I will retrieve obese or obesity. If I want either hypertension or hypertensive, I can type hypertensi*.

Look for articles that are relevant. Use relevant keywords you find in the subject field to expand your search.

Use quotation marks around phrases to find words adjacent to each other.

Refine your search:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overweight or obes* or “body mass index” or “weight gain”</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AND</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypertensi* or “high blood pressure”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Keep gathering new keywords to try along the way. Check the subjects of relevant articles and use those subject headings in your search.

Follow trails. When you find a relevant article, check the bibliography for additional sources. Also, search for additional articles by the author. Search the UCF Library Catalog to see if the author wrote any books on the topic.
Remember that limiting your search in the Search Options section makes your results list smaller. If you ask for research articles published in the last five years in English, you’ve already narrowed the search before you even type any keywords. If nurses rarely publish research in your area of interest you will be starting with a small pool to begin with in Cinahl, so try Medline.

Search all relevant databases. Each database is like a giant file cabinet of subject-related material. In order to do a comprehensive search, use all databases related to your topic.

- CINAHL is the major nursing and allied health database.
- Medline (a.k.a. PubMed) is the major medical database.
- PsycInfo covers all psychology journals.
- Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews is a database of research on evidence-based medicine.
- Web of Science (a.k.a Science Citation Index and Social Science Citation Index) is a very large database covering all of the sciences, including medicine and nursing.
- Dissertations &Theses Full Text is a database of dissertations and theses.

Ask for help!
Reference Librarians are waiting to help you, including me. Call, email, come into the library to the Reference Desk, or make an appointment for a virtual or in-person research consultation.

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