Locate print and online sources using keywords

Choosing the best starting point in the search for good sources can make a big difference in how long your research takes—and in the reliability of the sources you'll find.

For an overview of related key topics on conducting research, visit the videos and quizzes in this tutorial.

Explore It

To find answers to everyday questions, you have no doubt conducted many keyword searches using Google or other online search tools. While these general search tools are easy to use and convenient, if your search uses broad keywords the vast number of results you get can be overwhelming. The terms you use to search determine the quality and quantity of the results you will get. It can be very time consuming to dig through a large list of results to find relevant sources. To locate sources worth further consideration, you must choose your keywords and phrases carefully and take advantage of advanced search options.

When you search for sources using keywords you carefully select terms related to your topic that will focus and narrow your research to relevant print and online sources. Crafting keyword phrases takes some thought to narrow and focus your results. Whether you use Google, Questia, or your library’s catalog—each requires you to think carefully about the right words and phrases to return a manageable set of results.

The terms you use to search determine the quality and quantity of the results you will get. Certain strategies and tools can help you search libraries, databases, and other electronic collections with ease. The specific tools will vary among the different sites and databases you use.

Take a look at how a keyword search can be used in Questia.

The keyword search field also allows the use of quotation marks to limit search results to sources that include an exact phrase.
Most search tools, including Questia, also allow you to limit a search by publication date. In the example above, limiting the search to a particular publication date (not shown here) or range would narrow the results further to more useful, recent publications.

Learn It

Advanced search options in most library databases and Web search tools offer many ways to narrow and focus your search. The symbols or advanced search options may vary, but following are some of the most common ways to refine a search.

Quotation marks specify an exact word or phrase for your search (“state adoption laws”).

Boolean operators, including the words AND, OR, and NOT and some other characters and terms, help you narrow or expand search results.

AND limits a search and means you want sources having all your search words, in any order (crime AND punishment).

OR expands and looks for all the words. It means you want publications having any of your search words (crime OR punishment). Using OR will retrieve sources that contain only one of the search terms.

NOT limits a search. Include NOT before a keyword you don’t want; the results will include sources having the first word but not the second word (crime NOT punishment). However, using NOT can be dangerous when searching the full text of books and articles because it will eliminate any publication that has the specified word anywhere in it. NOT is best used when searching a specific field (such as title) rather than doing a full-text search. If you use NOT in the Questia keyword search, you can accidentally eliminate many of your relevant results.
Some search tools (including Google) use variations on these operators. For example, in Google you use a minus sign (−) instead of NOT. And in Google typing AND isn’t necessary, while other search tools require a plus sign (+). For library catalogs, databases, and many other search tools, check for advanced search pages where these options for refining a search are explained.

**Truncation** allows you to search for a term using alternate endings. Enter a root word followed by an asterisk (*) or another symbol (sometimes identified as a *wild card*) in order to find sources that use variations on that term. For example, if you wanted to search using keywords related to computers, you might type

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comput*
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The search then looks for and returns results on sources that use the related keywords:

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computer, computers, computing, computerized
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Note that truncation may not always be available; it is not used in some search tools (Google and Questia, for example). Some such search tools look for similar terms, alternative spellings, and words with the same root. Since search tools vary in the advanced search options available, you should check before you begin.

When using keyword searches to conduct research on a particular topic, be sure to keep a list of the keywords you use, to help you recall what works. Examine your list and consider keywords that look at your topic from another point of view. If your results include too few relevant sources, experiment with synonyms, phrases, and related subject terms to expand your search. If your results list is too long, try narrowing your keywords using Boolean operators or other strategies listed here. Finally, keep in mind that search terms and strategies that work well in one search engine, database, or library tool may not be as efficient in another.

**Use It**

Consider a research topic of interest to you and choose a keyword related to your topic for a search in your library's catalog or database main page, or in Questia. Try searching using two (or more) keywords with Boolean operators AND, OR, or NOT, or enclosing a phrase in quotation marks. Which combination of terms works well with the Boolean operators to return a manageable and useful set of results? Make a short list of the related words that the search engine returns in the results. Use synonyms for your keywords to see whether they further limit or expand the scope of your search results.