



HOW DO I FIND INFORMATION ON A SPECIFIC TOPIC?

Finding information for an assignment or other research projects can be a daunting task. The first place to try and find information will be the library. We subscribe to many databases, but productive library research requires more than just sitting down at a computer and typing in searches. It requires you to apply some basic critical thinking skills.

The Library has many printed and electronic resources where you can find information for your specific topic. The most important part, however, is to **start with what you know**: your topic; what your assignment asks you to do and the suggested references; and what information you need to fill the gaps in your own knowledge. The following steps will help you:

1. Identify your topic

- Identify your topic by thinking about the information you need. It is very hard to find something if you do not know what to search for.
- Is the topic too general? For instance, if you want to do research on the use of the Internet, you will find too much information to sort through. It is better to narrow down your topic so that it is more manageable. Try limiting your search by using one or more of the following:
 - A specific time period
 - A specific geographical area
 - A specific group of people
 - A particular aspect of the subject
 - From the viewpoint of a specific discipline
- For example, if you have to write an assignment of 15 pages on the use of the Internet, you might be able to narrow it down by limiting it to:
 - The past five years
 - South Africa
 - Undergraduate students



2. Select an information source

You have to ask yourself a number of questions to determine exactly what information you need for your topic:

- Do you have to write an assignment, a thesis, give a lecture or a presentation?
- How long does the assignment have to be? For example, do you need information for an assignment of 3 pages or 20 pages?
- Do you need current or historical information?
- Do you need information from books, journals, newspapers or all types of information sources?

By answering these questions you will know whether you have to use reference works, text books, journal articles or all of these sources. But, before sitting down at a computer, you need to identify the main concepts of your information needs in order to compile a **search strategy**.

3. Identify the key terms

This step involves the identification of the key terms for your topic. A topic can have one or more key terms, depending on the complexity. Identifying key terms is important because a computer cannot think. It searches only for the words that you type.

In our example of a search on the use of Internet by undergraduate students in South Africa, your key terms will be:

- Internet
- Undergraduate students
- South Africa



4. Identify the search terms

In this step you have to apply some critical thinking skills to the key terms and think of additional search terms to use. If you use only the key terms, you will retrieve some information, but by using additional search terms, you will ensure that you do not miss any important records. It is important that you spend enough time in identifying search terms in order to find the best records for your topic. The following list can help you make certain that you have covered all the possibilities:

- Synonyms
- Singular and plural forms
- Related terms
- Narrower terms
- Broader terms
- English or American spelling
- Abbreviations or acronyms

Looking at our example, you might include the following terms:

Internet

WWW

World Wide Web

Undergraduate student

University student

Tertiary student

South Africa

SA

Southern Africa



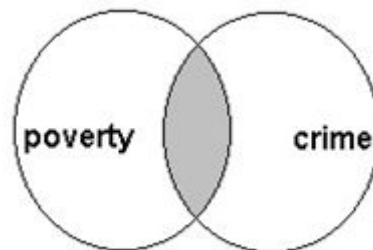
5. Combine search terms

This step involves combining the different terms that you have decided on. You can use special techniques to search more effectively. When you want more than one word or idea, you need to enter your search in such a way that the database will understand. Connector words such as **AND** and **OR** are important to use when you combine ideas. This is also known as Boolean logic.



When you want to find records that contain two or more ideas, you should connect the words with **AND**. This means that **both** concepts must appear somewhere in the record. **AND** is used to **narrow** a search. If a record has only one of the concepts, it will not be retrieved by this search. **AND** is best used for linking different ideas.

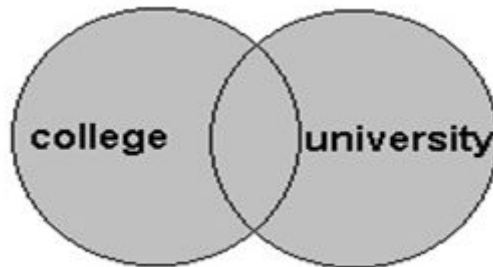
You can use **AND** many times in a single search statement.



E.g. poverty **AND** crime



When you use **OR** between two terms, it means that either term may be in the record that is retrieved. **OR** is best used for synonyms of a term. Because any one may appear in the record, **OR** is used if you want to **broaden** your search. We usually say **OR FOR MORE**. You can, as with **AND**, string as many terms together using **OR**. But remember, the more **OR**'s you use, the more records you will retrieve.



E.g. college **OR** university

A good place to start looking for information is the library online catalogue. The **Kovsiecat** directs you to printed books, e-books and printed journals in the library. (*If you are unfamiliar with the Kovsiecat, go to our **How do I?** web page and read the 'How do I find books and journals' guide.*)

Search the **library databases** using the library's search engine (on the library's home page: library.ufs.ac.za) or searching individual databases on our Electronic Resources web page. (*If you are unfamiliar with how to find electronic resources, go to our **How do I?** web page and read the 'How do I access electronic resources?' guide.*)

Remember to keep track of what you find and cite your resources.