Evidence Based Research for Social Work

A Library Guide

January 2018
INTRODUCTION

This guide summarises the key issues on searching techniques needed to produce a good quality research strategy.

A note about databases in general

If you are unfamiliar with database searching, there are some important things you should know, before you start.

Databases contain references from many hundreds or thousands of journal titles (and other information sources). The total number of references in a database might be in the hundreds of thousands or even millions. When you enter your keywords into the database you are searching all of these references at the same time. **It is a very efficient way to look for information.**

The Library subscribes to hundreds of databases to support the various programmes taught at the University. Within Social Sciences, there might be anything up to 50+ databases, which could prove useful. There will be a core number of journal titles which are indexed in more than one database but some databases contain journal references which are particular only to them. This is why researchers have to repeat their search in multiple databases to ensure that they are not missing any relevant results.

Each database is a separate entity and can be found on the A-Z list of Databases on the Library & ICT tab in Portal or from the Databases link on the Library webpages [http://library.ulster.ac.uk/electronic/](http://library.ulster.ac.uk/electronic/). However, many databases are also part of a larger set of databases belonging to a particular company or publisher. You can either choose to search an individual database or cross-search all the databases within a publisher collection at the same time.

Most serious literature searches will look at 5-8 database sources (sometimes more) depending on the subject area to ensure that nothing useful has been missed.

Not like Google

Searching the subject databases is not like searching Google. You cannot simply type in your assignment question and use whichever results are returned. Each database collection functions in a certain way and you must use the appropriate search options and limiters for each.

Some of the databases have a **subject index** or thesaurus, which helps define the meanings of various search words. This can help you use the correct terminology in your search, in addition to any extra keywords. They may also suggest **related** terms that you may not have thought of and allow you to expand your search appropriately. However, most databases do not have this type of subject indexing and rely solely on the keywords you choose.

You must combine your search words with the relevant search operators or connectors used by the database, e.g. AND, OR etc., and whichever special search techniques are available in the database of your choice, such as wildcards and truncation (see p7).
Accessing the relevant databases

All databases use the standard Open/Athens authentication, i.e. typing Ulster into the Find my Organisation box, clicking on the resulting link and entering your Ulster email and password when prompted.

For any access problems, see: [http://guides.library.ulster.ac.uk/soc/troubleshooting/](http://guides.library.ulster.ac.uk/soc/troubleshooting/)

Below are some of the most frequently used database platforms sources for evidence-based research in social work.

**OVIDSP Collection**

The OVID platform provides a range of databases covering a number of subject areas, including medicine, nursing, health care and psychology. Two are especially good for evidence based research: Medline - the largest medical and health database and PsycInfo, which is a specialist psychology database.

Medline uses something called Medical Subject Headings (MeSH). This provides a controlled vocabulary of some 15,000 terms which can be used to describe, very precisely, the content of medical documents. In addition to assigning MeSH terms that describe the topic of the article, the index provides terms that reflect:

- the age group of the population studied
- the nature of the studies, e.g. human, animal, male, female
- the material represented, (publication types) e.g. clinical trials, review, etc.

PsycInfo uses an equivalent (but not identical) APA Thesaurus of Psychological Index Terms and can offer limits such as qualitative or quantitative studies, systematic reviews and many others.

If you want to take advantage of the subject indexing options, you must search Medline and PsycInfo separately.

**Note:**
If you must demonstrate effective use of the subject index in your search history, use the Advanced search option, tick the “Map Term to Subject Heading” box and search for your concept words/phrases one at a time. If you want to use multiple search terms or use truncation/wildcards you should un-tick the Mapped Terms box.

Results are displayed in most recent date order. It is not possible to sort your results by relevance. Use the Limit and Additional Limit options to restrict results to peer-reviewed journals, published only in English, date range or other limits. Medline content is already peer-reviewed.

A series of short video tutorials on searching Medline is available at: [http://library.ulster.ac.uk/training/videoguides/medline_ovidsp/](http://library.ulster.ac.uk/training/videoguides/medline_ovidsp/)
PROQUEST COMPLETE Collection

Depending on your task, you can choose to cross-search the multi-faculty Complete Collection (approx. 50 databases), pick out a smaller faculty specific subject collection, e.g. Social Sciences Premium, (14 databases), or search only a single database, e.g. Social Services Abstracts. If a multi-database search returns too many hits, you may find it simpler to search a single specialist database with a more manageable number of results.

Other useful databases within Proquest Complete include ASSIA (Applied Social Services Index and Abstracts), Proquest Criminal Justice, Proquest Health & Medical and National Criminal Justice Reference Service Abstracts.

Each database within the collection looks and functions in the same way.

Most databases within Proquest do not contain a thesaurus of terms, so you normally use your own keywords or you can use terms already found via a previous OVID-type search.

Results are sorted in order of relevance. You should normally restrict your results to peer-reviewed articles only, but in this collection of databases you can also use the 'Scholarly' limit to remove non-academic journals. You may also limit by language and date.

SCOPUS

This database covers over 19,500 sources of high quality information in four subject areas – 2 of which will be relevant to you: Social Sciences & Humanities and Health Sciences.

Use the default Document Search screen (adding additional search rows as necessary) and build your search strategy. Scopus contains several indexes, including MeSH. Otherwise use your own keywords or terms already identified in a previous OVID platform search.

Results are sortable by date or relevance and may be further limited using the filters on the left of the results screen. Use the U Find it button to link out to full text (where available).

WEB OF SCIENCE Core Collection

Web of Science contains 6 databases, including the Social Science Citation Index, a multidisciplinary index to the journal literature of the social sciences. It indexes over 1,950 peer-reviewed journals across 50 social sciences disciplines. Web of Science does not contain an index or thesaurus of subject terms, so you will have to search it using your own keywords or terms already identified in a previous OVID style search.

Results display in most recent date order but can be re-sorted by relevance.
**EBSCOhost Collection**

This platform includes the *Criminal Justice Abstracts*, *British Education Index*, *ERIC* (Education Resources in Context) and *CINAHL* (Cumulative Index for Nursing and Allied Health).

*Criminal Justice Abstracts* covers 400 journals in the area of criminology, penology, probation and criminal justice.

*CINAHL* has authoritative coverage of the literature related to nursing and allied health. In total, more than 500 journals are regularly indexed. You can enter search terms and mark the “Suggest subject terms” check box. When you click Search, the corresponding thesaurus displays the most appropriate terms, similar to MeSH in Medline.

A video is available at: [http://library.ulster.ac.uk/training/videoguides/cinahl/](http://library.ulster.ac.uk/training/videoguides/cinahl/) The examples are nursing related but the search principles will be identical for social work.

**USearch**, the Library’s discovery tool, also uses the EBSCOhost layout and search functions.

**COCHRANE**

The *Cochrane Library* contains “high-quality, independent evidence to inform healthcare decision-making. It includes reliable evidence from Cochrane and other systematic reviews, clinical trials, and more. Cochrane reviews [...] are recognised as the gold standard in evidence-based health care”.

You can search Cochrane with keywords or MeSH, as well as browsing its Database of Systematic Reviews or the Register of Controlled Trials. The systematic review articles in Cochrane cannot be used as your chosen study. However, you can use the specific references within a review to locate an individual piece of research which may be appropriate.

**SOCIAL CARE ONLINE**

Part of Social Care Institute for Excellence, this resource is an excellent useful source of information, especially for those who may not have access to subscriptions-based databases. It is free to use (although you must set up your own login).

You can browse the topic areas or use a number of search levels to find information. However, its search options may not be as sophisticated as those offered by the library subscription databases, nor does it cover as many journals or sources of information as they do.

Nevertheless, it does cover grey literature, such as government papers and reports from health or social care bodies which may be missed from library databases. It also uses recognised UK social care terminology, so it can be a handy way of identifying relevant keywords.

There are many other databases available which might prove useful.

See: Library Social Work guide at: [http://guides.library.ulster.ac.uk/socialwork/](http://guides.library.ulster.ac.uk/socialwork/)
GOOGLE SCHOLAR

Google Scholar [http://scholar.google.co.uk/] is a sub-set of Google which searches academic sources only. It is a valuable research tool, particularly if you do not have access to the range of subscription databases available at the University. It will search through worldwide sources for academic and scholarly level books, journal articles and other papers.

Please be aware of the search limits within Google Scholar – they are not interchangeable with the option used in the Library databases. Full text availability will depend on whether the Library has a subscription to the reference source.

DEVELOPING YOUR SEARCH

1. Do you have to find a particular type of study, i.e. Quantitative or Qualitative?

   - An effectiveness question – e.g.
     - ‘How effective is solution focussed brief therapy for young people who self-harm?’ OR
     - ‘Does reminiscence therapy improve the quality of life for older people with mild to moderate dementia?’ These require quantitative studies.
   - A perspectives question – e.g.
     - Are young leavers satisfied with support services when transitioning to independent living?
     - What are the views of parents who have participated in Family Group Conferencing. These type of questions would need qualitative studies.

   Note: Many studies have elements of both type of research within them, but you may need to find studies that are primarily one or the other.

2. Creating a question to research

You may be asked to identify an area of interest and come up with your own question. If so, it can be tempting to research something which will be useful for another assignment. However, if a particular methodology has been specified, e.g. qualitative or quantitative studies only, make sure your idea can be translated into the appropriate type of question.

e.g.

   - Qualitative: What are the perspectives of teenagers participating in family group conferencing?
   - Quantitative: Is Family Group Conferencing effective with teenagers involved in anti-social behaviour?

OR

   - Qualitative: What are the attitudes of older people towards their excessive drinking?
   - Quantitative: Is motivational interviewing an effective intervention for older people who abuse alcohol?
Things to bear in mind

- Don’t make your question too specific, e.g. unnecessarily restricting it to ‘Northern Ireland’.
- Don’t include too many search concepts, e.g., How effective is CBT for teenage girls in foster care who self harm?" Each additional search concept reduces the number of appropriate results. Begin with fewer concepts and gradually add the extra terms, based on results found, to narrow your search.
- Using the “wrong” information source. Some databases are better for certain questions, e.g. a psychological intervention may have more coverage in Medline or PsycInfo. However, a question about “perspectives of looked after children on their transition from care”, might be better covered in a database such as Social Services Abstracts or Web of Science’s Social Science Citation Index.

3. Choose your search words

In addition to taking advantage of MeSH or other subject heading thesauri, you should also be prepared to define or describe your own keywords if necessary.

Synonyms or related terms
Identify similar terms (synonyms) for your keywords, to reflect differing ways to describe a topic and to increase the chances of finding a relevant record.

  e.g.  
  teenager, adolescent, juvenile, youth, young person etc.
  self-harm, self-injury, self-wounding, etc.
  drug abuse, substance misuse, addiction, etc.
  in care, residential care, “looked after children”
  old people, elderly, etc.

“Out of date” terminology
Consider also the historical timeframe for which you need information. Some research studies may have used or still use terminology which is now considered ‘out of date’, discriminatory or offensive, e.g. ‘mental retardation’ instead of ‘learning disability’ or ‘intellectual disability’. You may need to include these terms, as appropriate.

Truncation
This is a symbol (often * but always check your database) which, when added to the stem spelling of the word, will find all the variant endings, e.g.

  motivat* = motivate, motivated, motivator and motivational.
  child* = child, children, childhood and childlike.
  discrimin* = discriminate, discrimination and discriminatory.

Wildcards
Most of the databases are US-based, although they include journals from outside the USA, so you must consider variations in spelling between UK and US English, e.g.

  behavior / behaviour  organization / organisation  counseling / counselling
The wildcard symbol (often ? but always check your database) allows for this variation in UK v US English, by representing any alphabetical letter (or none) within the word, e.g.

- wom?n = woman or women
- organis?ation = organisation or organization
- behavio?r = behaviour or behavior

**Note:** some databases (such as SSCI on Web of Science) automatically allow for **UK/US spelling; singular/plural**, e.g. drug/drugs, woman/women; **tenses**, e.g. running, ran, runs and **degrees of comparison**, e.g. loud, louder, loudest.

### 4. Combine your search words using Connectors

You will have more than one search concept for your topic and it is necessary to link these concepts together in order to retrieve relevant material. You do this by using a range of connector words (sometimes called Boolean operators). The most common are:

- **AND**
- **OR**
- **NOT**

Examples of how each are used:

**AND**

| teenagers | AND | self-harm |

The **AND** connector means that only those articles containing both (or all) terms will be included in the results. If only one of the terms is present, nothing will be returned.

This helps to **FOCUS, NARROW or REFINE** your search.
The **OR** connector is used when there are alternative ways to describe your keyword. If **ANY** of the alternative terms are present, the article will be included in the results.

These alternative terms (or synonyms), used with **OR**, help to **WIDEN** or **EXPAND** your search.

The **NOT** connector means that if your unwanted term is present, the article which contains it will not be displayed as part of your results.

This helps to **EXCLUDE** items and can help in narrowing or focusing your search. However, you may exclude potentially **useful** material along with the unwanted term, (in the overlap area) so use this connector very carefully, if at all.

It is the careful combination of the **OR** and **AND** operators that hopefully returns a set of results which is wide enough to include all the relevant variation of terms, but is limited to only those where **all** your major concepts are present.

**Proximity operators/connectors**

In addition to the standard connectors described above, some databases also offer what are called **proximity operators**. These allow you to specify how close your search terms must be to each other.

Proximity connectors can include such terms as **WITHIN** (within x words of), **ADJ** (adjacent to), **NEAR**, etc. Always check the Help or Search tips in the specific database to see if these proximity connectors are supported.
5. Limits and filters

Some databases support search limit filters, including date, age, gender, type of document, (e.g. peer reviewed), language or methodology, (e.g. empirical study or randomised controlled trial). They are useful for refining your search results.

However, use these limit options selectively. It can actually be more effective to scroll through a larger number of results, viewing the abstracts and deciding if the reference is suitable, than relying on the multiple database limits do it for you.

Standard limits which should be used are: peer reviewed / scholarly (strictly speaking these terms are not interchangeable); published in English and journal articles (as opposed to other publication types). You may also wish to use a date limit if appropriate for your search.

RESULTS

Sorting by relevance (where available)

Many databases will automatically display your results in newest date order. This can be useful to find very recent material, but you may have to scroll through a large number of less useful items before you find material more relevant for your search topic. However, some databases have the option to sort by relevance as well as by date: those records which contain your search terms more prominently or more often, will be displayed at the beginning of the results list.

Abstracts

Your search words are not necessarily going to appear in the title of your article. Always check the abstract, as your keywords are more likely to be listed there instead. A short abstract will also help you determine how useful the article is likely to be.

Full-text and Find it

If the database can provide access to the full article, there may be a full-text link beside the record. If not, click on the blue U Find it button located beside each record to check against the 80,000+ electronic journals in the Library’s collection to see if we have the journal available via an alternative source. If we do, a link will be provided.

Document Delivery

If the U Find it button cannot locate any full-text, you can still obtain the article you want by requesting it via the online Document Delivery Service. This service is free.
SAVING AND DOWNLOADING SEARCHES

Saving results
You may wish to mark the useful references so you can download them at the end of the search process. Depending on your database, this may be a tick box to the right or left of each reference or possibly an “Add to Folder” link (CINAHL or Criminal Justice Abstracts).

Full-text
Remember that marking and downloading results refers only to the journal references NOT the full-text. Download any available full-text while still logged in to the database.

Search History as supporting evidence
If you need to supply a record of your search strategy, there is usually a separate Search History / Recent Searches function in the database, which will display the various steps and modifications you made during the search process and the number of results you retrieved at each stage.

Note: Printing off your abstract(s) is NOT the same as obtaining a search history.

Saving an active Search for re-use later
If you don’t have time to complete your search, you may wish to save it so that you don’t have to start from scratch when you next log in. Create a personal profile within the ‘My Research’ (or equivalent) section of the database to do this. Please note these personal profile details carefully. If you forget them, the Library cannot retrieve your searches for you.

AND FINALLY...
If you need help, please contact Janice McQuilkin - Magee Library, telephone: 71675066 or email j.mcquilkin@ulster.ac.uk or ahss@library.ulster.ac.uk