Video Transcript: 10 Research Tips and Tricks

These tips and tricks will improve your research process from choosing a topic to finding relevant sources.

Tip #1: Turn your topic into a research question.

In a single statement or question, describe what you want to find. To help narrow the scope of your topic, use who? when? where? why? and how? questions. In our example, we are interested in how public health care has evolved in the Maritime Provinces in the 18th and 19th centuries. The key components of our research question are: public health care, Maritime Provinces of Canada, and the time frame.

On our Research Help page https://lib.unb.ca/research/, see this handout about developing a research question https://media.lib.unb.ca/research/researchQuestion.pdf for further tips.

Tip #2: Choose databases to work with.

The library's home page lets you select subject guides from a number of disciplines. We are going to choose "History" and drill down to "Canadian History" from the detailed guides. The "Find Articles" tab takes you to a selection of databases that you can use to find articles on your topic. We will use America: History & Life as the key database for our topic.

Tip #3: Expand your searching vocabulary.

Think of words and phrases that make your topic searchable, such as synonyms. Use reference resources, such as handbooks, encyclopedias, and textbooks, to help you identify key terms relevant to your topic.

Use the subject index or thesaurus of your database, if it has one, to identify the subject terms that best describe your research question components. In databases published by EBSCO, such as this one, under "Indexes," we can select "Subject Terms" and browse for terms relevant to our topic. After searching the term "public health" as a subject, we can see that this term is associated with plenty of articles in this database. When we check the term "health care" as a subject, however, we see that it is not associated with many results. After we try "heath care reform," we can see that it is a better choice of terms. Use the subject index to test whether your search vocabulary will lead you to successful search results.

Tip #4: Connect your search terms with AND or OR.

These logical operators allow you to widen and narrow your search. Use OR to link related terms and broaden your search. Use AND to combine unrelated concepts and narrow your search.

Some databases let you select operators or you can include them with your search terms. We have combined our locations with the operator OR: Atlantic Provinces or Nova Scotia or PEI. Notice that we don't have to capitalize proper nouns but, in order to keep phrases like Prince Edward Island together, we are using double quotation marks. This search combines all of the health care AND location components of our research question.

On our Research Help page https://lib.unb.ca/research/, see our *Tips for Searching Databases* https://media.lib.unb.ca/research/Database_Searching.pdf, to review your search options.

Tip #5: Refine your search using database tools.

You may want to limit your search by time period, document type, language of publication, or publication date. Keep in mind that different areas of study and different databases have unique ways of limiting searches. In databases published by EBSCO, you can limit your search by selecting options on the left of your results or you can go to "Advanced Search" to modify your search settings. Since we are interested in the time period from 1700 AD to 1900 AD, we will resend our search with that limiter in place. Notice that we have reduced our number of results.

Tip #6: Use truncation and "wildcards" to make searching some terms easier.

Truncation allows you to search for variant endings of a word, usually by using an asterisk. For example, medicin* will find the word medicine OR medicinal OR medicines or any other word beginning with that letter string.

Wildcards, usually indicated by a question mark, allow for variations within a word. For instance, wom?n will find either the word woman OR women.

Check the help pages of your database for the available wildcard and truncation symbols.

Tip #7: Choose appropriate search fields.

The "Advanced Search" feature, in most databases, allows you to select the fields for specific elements of your search. Most databases let you specify an author, words in the title, subject, document type, language of publication, and year of publication. This database has many other options as well.

By leaving our settings at "Select a Field" we were in essence doing a keyword search, which is very broad and less precise. If we select "Subject Terms" for both of our sets of terms, this will narrow our search results to publications that specifically cover these subjects. The search fields in a database enable you to take advantage of its systematic organization of information. Notice that we have significantly reduced our results list.

Tip #8: Use the database search history to modify your search.

Most databases will let you review your searches and recombine these using logical operators to eliminate unwanted material or to introduce new concepts into an existing search. In databases published by EBSCO, this option is available under "Search History."

Note that the database has saved each of our submitted searches. Here is the initial search, the search that limits by historical period, and the search that utilizes subject fields. We can use this tool to search for tuberculosis within our final search results. We only need to type in the search id number and the additional term.

Tip #9: Analyze your results

Take a look at your results list and go into the full record of the publications. Consider the author's name and academic affiliation, if it is provided. Consider the date of the article and the status of the journal in which the article is published. Is it a peer-reviewed, scholarly journal or is it a popular press publication?

Read the abstract to gauge if this article is going to be of interest to you. If it is a relevant article, take a look at the "Subjects" field to see what other terms you can adopt into your current search.

On our Research Help page https://lib.unb.ca/research/, see our *Guide to Research Success* https://lib.unb.ca/research/success.php. Also, see our *How To Evaluate Your Sources* video https://lib.unb.ca/research/video/evaluatingSources.php, on our Video Quick Tips page https://lib.unb.ca/research/video.php.

Tip #10: Adapt your search

You will notice that while some results of your search look useful, others look less relevant. Rework your search by including relevant subject terms, keywords or truncations. For example, you can use the NOT operator to exclude extraneous material. Since I'm not interested in material on epidemics, I'm excluding epidemic or epidemics from my search.

For assistance with any of these steps, visit your library's Research Help Desk or Service Desk or talk to us via the chat widget on the library's webpage.