

Generating Synonyms

In this brief tutorial, we address the main problems with using synonyms in searching: knowing what they are and how to generate them.

Search engines have made online searching much faster and more effective, but they tend to be very literal. This 'literal-ness' means that most of the effort of variation and interpretation falls on you, and one of the main examples of this is the need for you to provide the search engine with any synonyms and alternate words that could be used to describe your topic.

For example, it may not be enough to simply use the word "stuffed animal" to find everything you want on that subject using a search engine; you may also need to search related words like "plush toy" and "teddy bear".

Coming up with synonyms can be tricky, especially when it comes to very specific topics and areas of research. There are, however, tricks you can use to make this easier, and we discuss the top two in this tutorial.

- (1) The use of a thesaurus to generate a relevance-ranked list of synonyms, and
- (2) The use of database search results to discover other commonly used terms that describe a topic or idea

The fastest and easiest way to generate synonyms is to use a thesaurus, like the one available on thesaurus.com

Thesauruses are created for the express purpose of generating synonyms, but are most effective when the word being searched is a common word like "encourage".

[search encourage]

Thesaurus.com will usually generate a list of possible synonyms, and all you have to do is go through the list and select the words that are the most relevant to your topic. This website even tries to make selection easier by highlighting the most relevant words in a deeper orange than the rest of the list.

When selecting your synonyms, however, you will also want to keep in mind what you want to find. If you don't think a word in the list will appear in an article you want, you shouldn't choose it – even if it is a synonym to your original term.

For words that are more topic-specific using thesaurus.com may still work, but it will not be as accurate or effective. In this case, you may want to search for your term in a subject database and then scan the results for other possible terms.

For example, if you want to search for the word 'alcoholism' you could go to the psychology database PsycINFO and do a basic search for your term there by simply typing it into the search box.

[search alcoholism]

You can then scroll through the results for other terms that authors use to describe alcoholism.