

Everyone Can Choose the Most Effective Search Terms

Every time you search, you face the same challenge: what are the best words to put in the search box to get the most useful results?

Different terms get different results, and terms change over time. Over the last several years, the term “interracial children” was often supplanted by “biracial children.” Today we often see “multiracial children.” Which will get the most recent results: ADD? ADHD? Attention-deficit disorder? Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder?

A recent eglobalSearch gave these results. PsycArticles results, which are APA journals only, are highly scholarly and credible, so they are a good test of the term:

Search term	Number of results	Comments on results
Interracial children	62	5 from PsycArticles
Multiracial children	67	1 from PsycArticles
Biracial children	156	1 from PsycArticles

Search term	Number of results	Comments on results
ADHD	14,055	168 PsycArticles
Attention-deficit disorder	15,130	233 from PsycArticles
Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder	16,204	185 from PsycArticles
ADD	117,194	This gave every result with the word “Add” such as “Just Add Money” in Budget Travel Magazine!

Have a clear idea of what you are looking for

- What’s my subject and what’s my angle on my subject? For example, different search terms will be needed to find *ADHD diagnosis* instead of *ADHD treatments*
- What would my ideal article or book or document be? What would its title be? Brainstorm an ideal title because it’s fun and it may help you think of good search terms
- Who would have written the ideal article? Try that name! What would this person’s qualifications be? What kind of work would they do? Try those words!

Ask yourself, your professor, fellow students, someone who might know more about this topic, or someone good with words

- Who cares about this topic? What words, names, and phrases would they use to talk or write about it?
- Where would people who care about this topic publish what they write? Are there any periodicals, associations, conferences, government agencies, or research centers?
- Is there a trade jargon or specialized vocabulary?
- Is there a website that lists related terms and provides links?
- Is there another way to say the same thing? For example, will *employment decrease* get the same results as *unemployment increase*?

Use tools that can help you find more search terms

- Index, text, table of contents, and glossary of any books you find
- Search the articles you find for more terms. Often a list of Descriptors or Subjects may be found in the citation of a relevant article
- Word reference books found online at <http://www.refdesk.com/factdict.html> include: thesaurus, dictionary, glossary, and unusual word reference books
- Library of Congress Subject Headings is a reference tool that reference librarians use to find alternative search terms. Ask a librarian or learn about it at http://www.lib.duke.edu/libguide/fi_books_sh.htm

When entering search terms in the search box, always be sure to

- Make sure you spelled the terms right. Is there a variant spelling?
- Put the most important term first. Do it again reversing the order!
- Start narrow, then go broader. Start with *ADHD treatment ritalin*, then go to *ADHD treatment*. Or start broad and then go narrower. Both strategies work!
- Follow the syntax rules of the search engine. Click “Search Help” buttons
- Use AND, OR, NOT if the search engine allows Boolean searches. Click “Advanced Search” or “Guided Search” buttons
- Put names and phrases in “ ” marks, such as “drug addiction” or “Carl Rogers”
- Make sure to combine your terms, such as [ADHD AND treatment] or [“biracial children” AND “academic success”]

Keep a record of which terms worked and which terms didn't work:

Search Term	How many results?	Notes on results

For more instruction and interactive practice, try these online tutorials:

Texas Information Literacy Tutorial (TILT) Module 2 on searching at

<http://tilt.lib.utsystem.edu/module2/tilt.htm>

LOBO tutorial “Developing a Research Strategy: Brainstorm Search Terms” at

<http://www.lib.ncsu.edu/tutorials/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=20&Itemid=43>