Library research is best approached with a good strategy. To find the information you need, take the time to develop a search strategy before jumping into a database, which is an online collection of information including articles, books and media, that you can search to find information related to your topic.

Searching in library databases is different from searching Google. Google will usually guess at what you need, by providing suggestions and correcting your spelling. But when using library databases, you have to tell the database exactly what you want in a very specific way.

The goal of this video is to help you develop a good search strategy to find the best material related to your research.

Start with your research question or topic. My research question is: Is euthanasia an ethical practice? Once you have formulated your research question or topic, identify the key concepts, or main ideas. These are the concepts on which you really want to focus when conducting your research, and you will use these to build your search.

My key concepts or main ideas are euthanasia and ethical. Once you have identified your key concepts, you will use them as your initial keywords, or search terms in the databases. We will take these words, and connect them using “AND”: euthanasia AND ethical. AND narrows down a search. I am not looking for information only related to euthanasia, I am looking for information about ethical concerns surrounding euthanasia.

If I tried doing a search using only the word euthanasia, I would find material on a variety of topics related to euthanasia and insurance claims, euthanasia and religious beliefs, and euthanasia and psychology. Trying to pull out the ethical-specific material would be difficult if I only searched for euthanasia, without the word ethical.

So we take our key concepts, and connect them using AND: euthanasia AND ethical. This becomes our first search strategy, and we can put this into a database. When using AND, it must be in capital letters, so the database knows you are using it to combine keywords.

Your first search will not always be the best search, and you may not even find anything that first time. You may have created a search strategy that is too narrow.

You want to create multiple strategies to use as you tackle the databases. Go back to those main ideas, and identify alternative keywords for each of them. These will be synonyms or words related to your key concepts. I’ll start with euthanasia. Other words that might get me similar results would be euthanize, assisted suicide, and mercy killing.

Sometimes, the words that come to your mind are not always the words used in the scholarly world. Think about medical, legal or scientific alternatives to your key concepts. Consider how you can broaden or narrow that specific concept. If you are
having trouble brainstorming keywords, there are a variety of resources to help you. Ask a classmate or a friend - sometimes two heads are better than one. Try Googling your topic or looking at the Wikipedia page to see what kind of vocabulary is being used. You can also use a thesaurus - try thesaurus.com.

Once you've identified some new words, you can swap them out for your original terms, and continue searching. Your steps to success in a search strategy are to start with a strong research question, identify the key concepts, use AND to connect different concepts to focus and narrow your search, and identify keywords to help you revise your strategy.

You can use these steps to get started in searching a library database. Watch the next video: Search Strategies, Part 2, for more information, and to create even more powerful searches. If you have trouble creating a search strategy or using library databases, contact a librarian at ask.library.jhu.edu.

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Video 2

Creating a search strategy before jumping into a database will save you time and effort once you start looking for information. Search Strategies, Part 1, explained how to break down your topic into keywords, and connect your search terms using AND. This video will show you how to take that strategy further, by using more advanced tactics.

After creating your first search, you should have brainstormed additional keywords to help your next searches. Instead of swapping them out for your original words, you can add them into the original search, connecting them with OR. Like AND, OR connects words together, but instead of narrowing, it broadens. I want to find information that uses the words euthanasia OR euthanize OR mercy killing OR assisted suicide. I’ll take information that uses any one of these terms. Instead of doing separate searches for each of these words, I can search for them all at once by using OR.

To make a search as effective as possible, use AND and OR together in the same search. I can start with my search for ethical AND euthanasia, but I also want euthanize OR mercy killing OR assisted suicide. I focus my search using AND, but cover all my bases by using OR.

Another effective way to save time and expand your options is to use truncation. To truncate something means to cut it short. We are going to truncate some of our words in order to find alternative endings.
Let’s take my key concept ethical. I will truncate ethical after the c, and add an asterisk. This will tell the database to search for words that start with ethic, and end in something else. It will pull up not just ethic, but ethics, ethical, and ethically all at the same time.

You can do this with most words, but be careful where you truncate each word. If I truncated ethics after the h, I would still get ethics, ethic, etc., but I would also get words like ethanol, ethnic, and ethnography, all of which are unrelated to my topic.

Creating a good search strategy will save you time and effort when starting your research. Start with a good research question, and identify the key concepts. Use AND to connect different concepts to focus and narrow your search. Use OR to broaden your options by connecting words that are related to each other. Truncate some of your words to expand your results a little more.

You can use these strategies simultaneously, or try different combinations to see what works best for you. If you have questions about developing your search strategy, or if you are having trouble finding information, visit us at ask.library.jhu.edu to get help from a librarian.