Effective searching: top tips for planning your search strategy

Before you start

- **Plan your search** before you start researching
  - This helps you focus your thoughts on your topic and saves time when searching/reviewing results

Keywords

- **Analyse your title** - what keywords in the title identify the topic you need to research?
- Keywords pinpoint the main topics you need to look at and are your starting point to find information

You could identify some **alternative keywords** to use, just in case your original ones don’t find everything you need.

- Alternative keywords allow for differences in word choice between authors, different spellings, the use of acronyms and abbreviations etc.
- Use lecture notes, thesauri, background reading for ideas. Think about:
  - Similar terms (synonyms) – words that mean the same as your topic keyword e.g. film -> movie
  - Broader terms – these relate more generally to your topic e.g. Twitter -> social media
  - Narrower terms – more focussed terms that relate to your topic e.g. computers -> laptop

**Truncation**

- Many search terms can be **abbreviated** – or **truncated** – to find all possible endings for the word.
- Take the stem of the word and truncate it to allow for all endings – by adding a * after the last letter common to all the variations e.g.
  - Photograph* finds photograph, photographs, photography, photographer etc.
  - Be careful though – photo* would find photosynthesis, photocopy etc.!

**Phrase searching**

- Find more focussed results with phrase searching
- Search for words in a specific order, with nothing else in between!
- Only effective if the words naturally form a phrase e.g. “digital photography” but not "photography digital"

**Linking with AND and OR**

- Most search engines assume terms are linked with ‘and’ i.e. you find term 1 and term 2 in your results
- Use OR to find alternative terms with one search e.g. film or movie returns results with either term in
  - You can use brackets to do an OR search in conjunction with other terms that must be found e.g.
    - (film or movie) edit* -> will find results on film editors/editing or movie editors/editing etc.

Create an effective search – combine it together!

To get a good set of results quickly, you can develop an effective search that covers your key topics and allows for alternative endings or alternative search terms – and specify key phrases if appropriate e.g.

   “Social media” (film* or movie*) promot*

Review your results list

- Look at your results and evaluate how well your search worked – and whether you’ve found what you need
- Do your keywords appear in titles? When were the results published? Are they relevant?

Evaluate whether you need to adapt your search to find better or more results. Don’t forget to look past just your first page of results!