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Identifying and using search terms/concepts/keywords in literature searching

The aim of this guide is to help with the identification of alternative search terms (often also called keywords) when searching the journal databases, and to provide ideas of where to look to help literature searchers think of, and generate, alternative search terms.

The guide will cover:
- A. Identifying concepts (broad subject) areas
- B. Preparing to generate alternative search terms
- C. Where to look to generate ideas for alternative search terms
- D. Table of suggested search terms

A. Identifying concepts.

Having identified the research and the type of articles you are aiming to retrieve from your literature search, it is important now to identify, list and group together the actual search terms to use to search the electronic journal databases (such as CINAHL, AMED etc.). This way you can ensure, as far as possible, you find the most appropriate range of articles on your given topic.

Your research question forms the basis for thinking about and generating your search terms. An example of a research question is:

What occupational therapy interventions can be used for children with autism?

The concepts for this would be:

- Occupational therapy
- Children
- Autism

B. Preparing to generate alternative search terms.

First draw up a table as shown below heading each of the columns with the concepts to search. Then list alternative terms under the relevant headings.

What occupational therapy interventions can be used for children with autism?

Occupational therapy terms	Child related terms	Autism related terms

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C. Where to look to generate ideas for alternative search terms.

The sources listed at 1- 7 below can help identify alternative subject terms/concepts:

1) text within articles already found

2) contents pages and introduction pages of books and other publications about the chosen subject

3) a dictionary

4) a medical dictionary

5) a thesaurus

6) The National Library of Medicine MeSH (Medical Subject Headings) terms

Several journal databases use this thesaurus for indexing articles. It can also be helpful to use this resource when generating terms to search and for identifying narrower or broader terms. (e.g. *Trigger Finger Disorder* is a narrower term of the very much broader term *Musculoskeletal Diseases*). When deciding if broader or narrower terms should be included in the search, in the example given, questions to help the decision might be:

- 'Am I interested in retrieving articles including the broader term 'Musculoskeletal Diseases' or interested in articles about musculoskeletal diseases in general'?
- 'Do I only want to retrieve specific articles about Trigger Finger Disorder'?

If articles on the latter subject will only be of interest, it is only the latter that should be searched. If, after looking at MeSH, articles with the broader subject content of Musculoskeletal Diseases would also be of interest, this broader term should also be included in the search.

MeSH is an American thesaurus. It is helpful to bear this in mind when searching this resource to generate terms. American and UK spellings can vary, e.g. pediatric (US) paediatric (UK). Searching MeSH for the UK spelling 'paediatric' produces zero results. Searching the US spelling 'pediatric' lists however, several options from which to choose.

7) Browse the table below for terms of relevance and to spark ideas

D. Table of suggested search terms

The list below is not exhaustive but may help the generation of search terms. Concepts in green banners are followed by some alternative search terms for consideration. *The list of terms will be added to over time.*

Child/ child related terms		
Child	Infant	Youth
Teenager	Neonate	Teen
Adolescent	Baby	Young People
Young person	Kid	
Autism/ Autism related terms		
Autism	Autistic	Asperger(s)
Occupational therapy		
Occupational therapy	Occupational therapist	Occupational therapists

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Allied Health Professions		
Allied Health Profession	Allied Health Professions	Allied Health Professional
Allied Health Professionals	AHP	Professions Allied to Medicine
PAM		
Forensic related terms		
Correctional facility	Forensic	High secure
Medium secure	Low secure	Maximum security
Secure hospital	Offend	Secure environment
Secure unit	Secure service	Secure setting
Secure ward		
Older people related terms		
Aged	Aging	Ageing
Frail	Elderly	Geriatric
Gerontology	Older adult	Older people
Older person	Pensioner	Retired/ Retiree
Senior		
	Finance/ finance-related terms	
Cost	Economic	Money
Monies	Saving	Expensive
Inexpensive	Finance	Price
York Health Economics Consortium (YHEC) have also produced a glossary of key terms used frequently in the field of health economics. http://www.yhec.co.uk/tools- resources/glossary/		

Remember to check spellings when writing down search terms or entering these on the databases.

When generating terms, consider:

a) **plurals**, **alternative spellings, hyphenation**, **American spellings**, **acronyms**, other **abbreviations** for terms chosen.

b) **Truncation.** For specific search terms chosen, some may have alternative endings. *Therap* is the stem for several terms (therap**ies**, therap**ist** or therap**ists)** all of which have the same initial string of letters. The truncation symbol (usually an asterisk (*) or a dollar sign ($)) could replace the letters in green as shown below.

- therap**y**
- therap**ies**
- therap**ist**
- therap**ists**

Where the last letter common to all the terms appears, at that point add the truncation symbol. Entering *therap** in the database would enable a search for all the terms listed above.

Truncation symbols: Some database platforms use the truncation symbol ***** some use **$** to truncate. *Some databases do not allow truncation at all.* Check before beginning to search whether the database being searched supports truncation and, if so, which symbol to use. Not understanding how truncation is managed in the database being searched can adversely affect the search and results.

When to not truncate: If a chosen term includes a string of letters which might often be found together in other words, unrelated to the subject. For example, if looking for articles about teenagers it might be helpful *not* to truncate the term teen', instead search the term in full. Searching for 'teen*' could retrieve articles including the terms fifteen etc. which may not necessarily be about teenagers.

You are now ready to complete the next stage of the literature search. The next stage you choose will depend on how you approach your literature search. *The associated Information Skills guide: Searching for evidence: literature searching* may also be of interest, providing an overview of the different stages of a literature search.