

## Transcript: Creating an effective search query

This video explains how to create an effective search query to submit to catalogues and databases in order to help you find results relevant to your subject and research area. If you have been struggling to find material because your searches are bringing back too many results that are not relevant to your research, or you are finding hardly anything connected to research, this video can help you.

There are two key elements to this video. One, the research cycle and two, creating an effective search query. Firstly, I'll introduce you to the research cycle.

There are four steps in the research cycle.

One, the source that you use to conduct research; two, your search strategy; three, reviewing your search results; and four amending your search strategy.

Starting with the 'source' at the top of the cycle: think about what sources you are going to use. For example, are you going to use a scholarly database such as Scopus, PubMed, Web of Science, or are you going to use a search engine like Google Scholar? Google Scholar is a popular choice because it provides a simple search interface and it brings back lots of results. However, sometimes it can bring back too many results that are not relevant to your research and it's not easy to filter them. Bibliographic databases are an excellent option for finding research because they are often dedicated to a particular subject area, which Google Scholar is not. Once you know the key databases for your subject area, you can find relevant research your topic. There should be fewer results to work through and the interface will be set up to easily filter the results.

Moving on to your search strategy, think carefully about your search terms. Which words and phrases would have been used by scholars writing on your topic? These will be your search terms. Are there any synonyms or alternative spellings and how are you going to enter these into your chosen search tool?

Next is to review your search results. Once you've got some results, you're going to want to start reading. However, it's also good to review results critically. If you haven't got many results or if the results you have

got are not really on your topic, then you might want to change the search tool you're using. Or change your search terms.

Finally, this leads on to amending your search strategy. When you find a relevant item, it is a good idea not only to read it but also to look at the item's bibliography. This will give you more things to read. However, as you look through bibliographies and do your reading, keep your research question in mind. It may be that there are key words and phrases coming up that you didn't think of when you did your original search. In which case you might want to add the new terms to your search and run it again.

Now that you are aware of the research cycle, let's move on to creating an effective search strategy.

I'm going to work through an example research question on the 'rights of child asylum seekers'.

First, I'm going to introduce you to concepts in a search query. There are three concepts in my research question. They are: 1) human rights, 2) Child, 3) asylum seekers. When creating a search query, you should put an AND between each concept so the search engine or database knows you want results that include all three concepts. However, a lot of platforms would assume 'AND', so this is not always essential. In this slide you can see a table which I'm using to build up my search query.

Once you have divided your research question into concepts, you need to think about whether there are any synonyms or alternative phrases for these concepts. I have come up with some synonyms for my research question. An alternative to 'asylum seekers' is 'refugees'. An alternative to 'child' is 'minor' or 'juvenile'. I don't have any alternatives for 'human rights' though because this is a concept in its own right and I cannot think of an alternative way of saying it.

Between each synonym or alternative phrase, you put the word OR. This tells the catalogue or database to search for 'asylum seekers' OR 'refugees', for instance. Looking at the search string at the bottom of the slide, the concepts now include the synonyms and are in parentheses, or round brackets, with 'AND' telling the catalogue or database to search for all concepts.

In this slide you will see that we have added some punctuation to the words. So that the database picks up singular and plural versions of the

search terms, we use an asterisk at the end of the word. The database searches for that word, plus any number of letters after it. For 'refugee', the database will search for 'refugee' OR 'refugees'; for 'child' it will find 'child' OR 'children'.

Notice that the word 'minor' has a question mark at the end. If we put an asterisk, which searches for multiple additional characters, we may get back results with the word 'minority', which loses the meaning we intend. The question mark represents just one single character, whereas the asterisk represents multiple characters so the database will search for anything with the word 'minor', plus one additional character at the end: 'minors' (plural).

Notice also that 'asylum seeker' and 'human rights' have quotation marks around them. This instructs the database to search for those words together. If we did not have the quotation marks around the words 'human rights', for instance, we may get back items on the rights of animals which mentions the word 'human', which isn't what we mean. The quotation marks ensure the database finds items with the two words 'human' and 'rights' next to each other in that order: 'human rights'.

This is what my search query now looks like. ("Asylum seeker\*" OR refugee\*) AND (child\* OR minor? OR juvenile\*) AND "human rights" with all the necessary punctuation.

You will find an accompanying document with this video with a blank template to help you create your own effective search query using these tips.

Let's take a look now at how you'd enter this search query into a database.

I'm going to use the example of the popular platform Web of Science. Despite its name, subject coverage is not limited to the sciences.

To navigate to the Web of Science, open a web browser and go to SOLO, the University's resource discovery tool, by entering [solo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk](http://solo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk). Make sure you are signed into SOLO with your Single Sign On. This is so that when you click through to the Web of Science, it recognizes you're a member of the institution and gives you access to the database. Click 'sign in' in the top right. Choose Oxford Single Sign On and enter your credentials. For help with your Single Sign On, go to IT Services' website [it.ox.ac.uk](http://it.ox.ac.uk).

Type 'Web of Science' into the search bar. Narrow down to 'Oxford collections' and click the search button. In the results page, click 'Online access' to Web of Science, which is the top option.

Now that we are in Web of Science, you can see that there is just one line on to which I can enter the first concept of my search query. To add additional rows for the second and third concept you simply click 'add row'.

Because I'm entering one concept per row, I do not need to put the brackets around the concept but I do need to put the asterisks, question marks and quotation marks as well as OR.

I'm going to enter my first concept in the first row ["asylum seeker\*" OR refugee\*].

To enter the second concept, I need to click 'add row'. AND has already been provided for me, so I just need to type in my second concept [child\* OR minor? OR juvenile\*].

To enter the third concept, I need to click 'add row' again and, as before, AND is already provided for me. I type in my third concept ["human rights"].

Now I click the search button.

We can see that the database has brought back 181 results that match my search query. If I click on the title of one of the results to view the full record, we can see that the search terms in my query have been picked up in the abstract and subjects which were attached to the record, highlighted in yellow. To see whether you have access to the item through the Bodleian Libraries' subscriptions, click 'Find it at Oxford'.

If you're wondering what are some good databases for you to use in your research area, I would suggest navigating to our online subject guides at [libguides.bodleian.ox.ac.uk](http://libguides.bodleian.ox.ac.uk). If you click on 'Subjects A to Z', you will find guidance for all subject areas and resources that are useful for you.