Narrowing down your search

DEVELOPING YOUR SEARCH

Objectives  To explore different ways of narrowing down your search.

Comments  Learning a few simple search techniques can help save you a lot of time.

THINK

When carrying out your searches, look at the number of results you retrieve. It isn’t possible to give an ‘optimum’ number of records for which you should aim: an exhaustive literature search for a doctoral thesis will be quite different in scope to a few quick hits to update you on a topic, for example.

However, you don’t want to waste time ploughing through dozens of irrelevant results, so do read on for some simple but effective techniques for developing your search.

GENERAL SEARCH PRINCIPLES

It’s often better to start a search broadly, and then gradually narrow it down. If you start off with a very specialised search, you may miss out on useful hits which don’t quite match your search terms.

You won’t find everything you need with just one search, so be prepared to spend some time refining and developing it. As you look through your results, you should get useful pointers for alternative keywords, and be alerted to any ambiguities in your search terms.

Even if you can search a particular resource via LibrarySearch, you may find that doing a separate search on the resource itself will give you more sophisticated options (especially if you use the advanced search).
Found too much?

Search a more specialised resource

More specific search terms

Apply limits (date, genre etc)

Combine terms with ‘AND’

For example, music AND worship only retrieves records containing both of those search terms.

If searching for a phrase, put it in inverted commas (e.g. “All day and all of the night”) to ensure the resource searches for it as a complete phrase.

Looking for your search terms in a certain field only (e.g. keywords or title) should improve the relevancy of your results. You may need to use advanced search for this option.

All our e-resources have different scope and coverage. Check the listing on the Library Guide to see if there is a more suitable resource for your requirements.

Look at the keywords and subject headings in your search results to get ideas for more specific search terms.

You can usually apply limits before or after you do your search: for example, by time period, genre, format of material, full-text availability etc.