

## Applying a Search Strategy

### Step 1. Concept mapping

Write your essay title in this box. Highlight the key concepts within the question. These will become your initial search terms.

E.g. What impact is **environmental change** having on **coral reefs** in the **South China Sea**?

Question:

Concept 1

e.g. environmental change

Concept 2

e.g. coral reefs

Concept 3

e.g. South China Sea

### Step 2. Alternative keywords

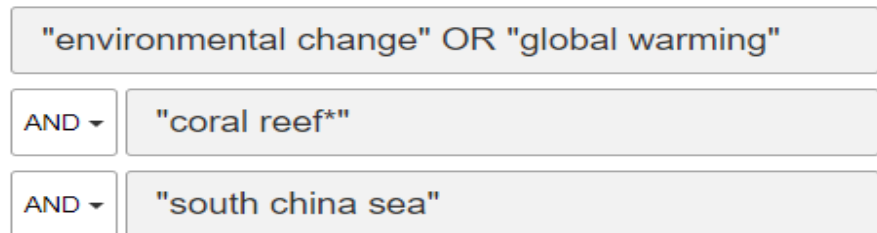
Think of all the different ways to express the same concept, broader terms, narrower terms, technical terms and international variations in terminology e.g. environmental change OR global warming – heart attack OR myocardial infarction – pavement OR sidewalk.

Which of these alternative keywords would be useful to include in your search strategy?

Add them to the boxes above with the word OR in between. (There may be more than 3 concepts – there may be lots of alternative terms!)

### Step 3. Searching databases

Once you have decided on your keywords you can use them to construct a database search. Most databases have an advanced search screen where you can search for multiple concepts in one go. Alternatively you can build searches step by step by searching for each individual concept and then using a search history option to combine them. An example using our initial example may look something like this:



One line per concept.

Put OR between your alternative keywords.

Combine your concepts using AND.

AND and OR are Boolean operators.

Check out the options for limiting your searches. These search limiters may appear on the search screen or on the results screen and often include options such as Date, Language or Source type. The latter may be very useful especially if you have been asked to search for a peer reviewed journal article.

### Step 4. Database tips and tricks

You can often use special symbols in your search strategy (like the \* and “ in the example above) to perform special functions – always check the help menu.

- Truncation (usually \*) searches for a stem of a word e.g. manage\* will find manage, management, manager/s, managed, managerial, manages
- Wildcard (Ebsco = ?) will find alternative letter spellings e.g. Organi?ation will find organisation or organization, # allows extra letter eg labo#r will find labor and labour
- Phrase searching “Quotation marks” will allow you to search for 2 or more words next to each other in that order
- Proximity searching (can differ between databases) - Ebsco uses n+number (1-5) for words in either order e.g. Britain N3 economy – words either way round but within 3 words of each other. Alternatively use w+number (1-5) for words in this order within a given number of words e.g. Small w1 medium – medium following up to one word after small
- Thesaurus searching - Some databases have a separate search option to use search terms from a controlled vocabulary e.g. Medline MeSH Headings. CiNAHL Subject Headings or the Engineering Village Thesaurus. Look at help pages of individual databases to find information on using these search terms and incorporating them into your search strategy