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Search Skills: Thinking About Keywords



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**What are
keywords?**



What are keywords?

Significant words or phrases you can use in a search to find relevant information

You can use keywords to do a broad search on a topic, or to find specific information

You will find keywords in the titles, abstracts and subject headings of references in online resources



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Identifying keywords

Identifying keywords

1

- Think about your assignment topic and break this down into its main **concepts**

2

- Identify relevant **keywords**, including **synonyms**, for each concept

3

- Consider using **broader** and **narrower** keywords

4

- Consider **different spellings** (e.g. UK and US), acronyms, abbreviations, plurals and word variations

5

- Use an **asterisk** to search for different word endings (e.g. **educat*** will find educate**e**, educate**s**, education**ion**, educating**ing**, educator**ors**, educate**d**)

6

- Use **quotation marks** around a phrase (e.g. **“higher education”**) to ensure these words are found next to each other

**Let's look at these
one at a time ...**

Step 1

Here's an example topic:

Is tea or coffee more popular amongst undergraduates in higher education?

You can break this topic down into **four** main **concepts** ...

Tea

Coffee

Undergraduates

Higher
education

Step 2

Identify any synonyms for each concept

Different authors will use different keywords when writing about similar topics

To find as much relevant information on a topic as you can, identify any **synonyms** (different words with the same meaning) for each concept

Tea

Brew, Cuppa,
Char

Coffee

Joe

Undergraduates

Students

Higher
education

HE,
University,
College

Step 3

Consider using broader and narrower terms

Using **broader** and/or **narrower** terms in your search will help you find additional information

Tea

Brew, Cuppa,
Char

Drink,
Beverage

Breakfast,
Camomile,
Earl Grey ...

Coffee

Joe

Drink,
Beverage

Latte,
Cappuccino,
Americano ...

Undergraduates

Students

Learners

Freshers,
Second year,
Final year ...

Higher education

HE,
University,
College

Academia

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Nottingham

Step 4

For example:

UK or US

• **camomile OR chamomile**

Acronyms

• **HE OR higher education**

Plurals

• **student OR students**

Word
endings

• **learn OR learns OR learners
OR learning OR learned**

Step 5

Using the **asterisk** at the end of a word stem is called **truncation**

This will help you to find all the **different endings** of a word in one search

For example:

Student*

- Will find: **student** OR **students**

Learn*

- Will find: **learn** OR **learns** OR **learners** OR **learning** OR **learned**

Step 6



Use quotation marks to search for phrases

Using **quotation marks** around a **phrase** ensures these words are found next to each other in your search

For example:

“peppermint tea”

“decaffeinated coffee”

“higher education”



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Using a search matrix

**You could use a
search matrix
to identify and record
relevant keywords,
like this ...**

Example topic:

Is tea or coffee more popular amongst undergraduates in higher education?

Concepts	Tea	Coffee	Undergraduates	Higher education
Synonyms	Brew, Cuppa, Char	Joe	Students	HE, University, College
Broader terms	Drink, Beverage	Drink, Beverage	Learners	Academia
Narrower terms	Breakfast, Green, Camomile, Earl Grey, Peppermint, Fruit, Herbal ...	Latte, Cappuccino, Decaffeinated, Espresso, Americano, Mocha ...	Freshers, Second year, Final year ...	University of Nottingham
Word variations	Tea* Camomile/Chamomile "Earl Grey"	Coffee* Decaf*	Undergraduate* Student* "Second year*"	"Higher education" Universit*

This matrix has been adapted from:

Rumsey, S. 2008. How to find information: a guide for researchers. Maidenhead, Open University Press.

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