Search Skills: Thinking About Keywords
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
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, educates, education, educating, educators, educated)

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
Break down your topic into its main concepts

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 …
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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Synonyms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tea</td>
<td>Brew, Cuppa, Char</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffee</td>
<td>Joe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduates</td>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>HE, University, College</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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
  - University of Nottingham
Step 4
Consider different spellings

For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UK or US</th>
<th>• camomile OR chamomile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acronyms</td>
<td>• HE OR higher education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plurals</td>
<td>• student OR students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word endings</td>
<td>• learn OR learns OR learners OR learning OR learned</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Step 5
Use the asterisk to search for different word endings

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”
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?

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

This matrix has been adapted from:  
For further help

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