Choosing Keywords

This guide briefly demonstrates how to choose keywords to use as search terms in library databases and catalogs (used best in conjunction with Boolean Operators)

Getting Started
Choosing your keywords is one of the most important parts of the research process. This is because your keywords are also going to be the search terms you put into library databases and catalogs to search for resources.

If you think you can simply type a question into a database like you would type a question into Google then think again—databases do not function the same way as internet search engines. For this reason, the selection of your keywords is very important (make sure you look at the Performing Searches handout) and consists of three main steps.

Step 1: Find the Main Idea
Identify the main ideas or concepts from your research question or thesis statement. Which words best represent the main focus of your research?

Some things to remember when identifying main ideas: leave article words (“a,” “an,” the”) and preposition and verb phrases (“on,” “in,” “going to”) alone. Additionally, you use nouns (person, place, or thing) as keywords but avoid using verbs and use adjectives as little as possible.

Example:

What is the relationship between children who drink diet soda and weight gain?

→ children → diet soda → weight gain

Step 2: Think of Synonyms or Related Words
Once you have selected keywords that represent the main idea of your research question or thesis, think of synonyms of those keywords. Synonyms are words that have the same (or nearly the same) meaning as other words.

Example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children</th>
<th>diet soda</th>
<th>weight gain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>adolescents</td>
<td>low calorie soda</td>
<td>obesity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>youths</td>
<td>diet pop</td>
<td>weight gain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>minors</td>
<td>diet beverage</td>
<td>Increased body mass</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Step 3: Choose a Combination of Keywords
After you have your list of keywords and synonyms combine those terms using the Boolean Operators AND, OR, and see Performing Searches handout if you do not know what Boolean Operators are).

Examples:

Children AND “diet soda” AND obesity
Youths AND low calorie soda OR “diet pop” AND Overweight
Children NOT youths and “diet beverages” AND OBESITY “weight gain”

Try different combinations from your list of synonyms and related words if you are not getting the desired results.