Developing a search strategy for your research question

Overview

1. Identify searchable concepts in your research interest.
   a. Most graduate student research assignments have 2-3 searchable concepts
   b. Some words that appear in a statement of research interest may not be useful in your literature search
      i. Varies with subject and database
         1. “effect”, “results” and “relationship” tend not to be good terms
         2. “studies” is a subject term in many databases; use it when you want to find reports of research rather than conceptual or theoretical work (but this does not work in all databases)

2. Make a table putting the different concepts across the top; now spend some time identifying alternative terms for each concept. Think of narrower, broader, and related concepts. At this stage, be creative; you are not just looking for synonyms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Housing policy</th>
<th>Muslim immigrants</th>
<th>europe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban housing policy</td>
<td>Ethnic mix</td>
<td>germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantaged groups</td>
<td>Immigrants</td>
<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Consider the type of material you need:
   a. For a literature review, you probably need articles from academic/scholarly/peer-reviewed journals
   b. When looking for evidence and counterevidence to make an argument, you may be looking at a broader array of sources which could include articles from policy and professional publications, news sources, and grey literature (reports from government agencies and intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations)
   c. You might be looking for statistics to support your contentions

Typically different source types are found in different databases, particularly news and statistics.

4. Identify databases that index the kind of material you are looking for.
   a. Consult the research guide for your program
   b. Consult the list of Databases by subject and type on the library home page
   c. Consult your librarian

5. Run your first search, using your best-informed-guess to choose keywords and databases.

6. Analyze your results:
   a. You probably have at least a few articles that look good. Look at the abstracts to be sure.
   b. If the search has returned a lot of good results, save the ones you want to read in a folder in the database or in a research manager.
   c. If you don’t have enough material, look at the abstract/citation view of the articles that do look on point.
      i. Can you identify any keywords or subject terms that would help your next search?
      ii. Look at the bibliography. Can you identify other articles that look relevant? Use those articles, and search the names of the authors to see if they have written more on the subject.
      iii. If you need help, contact your librarian.

   d. If you have far too many results:
      i. Consider limiting your search to the abstract field
      ii. Consider using more precise terms in your search
      iii. Are there obvious limiters you can use, such as eliminating articles in languages you can’t read, or eliminating very old material if it will not be relevant?