Choosing Keywords for Research

This guide demonstrates how to choose keywords for search engines, book catalogs, and library databases. You can view a video of this topic at http://libguides.seminolestate.edu/tutorials/chooseterms

Three-Step Process

From your thesis statement or research question, identify the main concepts or keywords. By creating a list of keywords, you will be able to construct better and more efficient searches. These in turn will lead you to more plentiful and relevant information supporting your thesis.

Follow the three-step process below for discovering keywords. It is helpful to keep track of the keywords on a sheet of paper or a word processing document for reference.

1. Extract single words or short phrases.

You will not use complete sentences as you would in normal conversation to search. Leave out minor words such as articles ("a," "an," or "the") and prepositions or verb phrases ("on," "in," or "going to").

Also, use nouns (person, place, or thing) as keywords. Avoid verbs (action words) and use adjectives (descriptive words) sparingly.

Examples:

→ cat
→ dog
→ education

→ boat
→ car
→ carbon emissions

2. Experiment with different synonyms.

Try thinking of synonyms (words that have the same meaning as another word) of your keywords. For example, you start with the word "trash," but you could also experiment with using the words "garbage" or "waste." An online or printed thesaurus is a great place to find synonyms.

Examples:

→ feline
→ canine
→ school

→ ship
→ automobile
→ greenhouse gas

3. Think of related terms to describe your topic.

What are some other topics or areas related to your research? These may be worthy of consideration if you are having trouble finding good keywords or if you want to further refine your research focus. For example, some related terms to "pollution" are "acid rain," "global warming," or "refuse water." The related terms may be more specific or less specific than the original terms in your thesis. Each combination will change the number and type of your search results.

Examples:

→ animal
→ pet
→ teacher

→ watercraft
→ transportation
→ ozone layer