



Academic excellence for
business and the professions

Literature searching

Part One- Searching databases

Steve O'Driscoll (SHS Research Librarian)
s.odriscoll@city.ac.uk

Contents of session

- Databases- an overview
- Structuring your search
- Database search functionalities

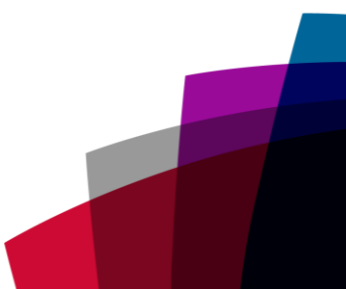
Databases- an overview

Databases are the main resources you will need to use to find relevant literature for your research.

Databases allow you to retrieve studies from a wide range of academic journals, as well as sometimes other types of information such as conference proceedings.

A list of databases relevant to your subject can be found in your subject guide

<https://libguides.city.ac.uk/home>



There are databases available which cover specific subject areas and those which cover all subjects.

Most databases can be accessed individually whilst some are available under platforms (resources which provide access to a number of different databases).

The two most well known platforms are **EBSCOhost** (which provides access to databases covering a variety of subjects) and **Ovid Online** (which provides access to health databases).

There is no set number on how many databases you are expected to search but a range of around 4 to 8 is common practice.

A decorative graphic in the bottom right corner consisting of several overlapping, semi-transparent geometric shapes in shades of red, purple, and blue.

Structuring a search

Unfortunately, searching databases isn't as simple as typing in your research question and retrieving relevant studies.

For example, entering this search into a database will either retrieve only a few results or lots of irrelevant results:

An analysis of how financial concerns contribute to mental health issues amongst University students?

That is because a database will either try and find studies where **all** of these words appear or where **any** of these words appear.



Select the main concepts of your question

Your first step, in performing a literature search, is to select the main concepts from your topic, to highlight the most searchable terms

From our example these concepts would be:

finances

mental health

University students

Terms such as *analysis* and *contribute* do not need to be added to a search as they are too broad and vague.



Combining these concepts together using the **AND** operator

e.g. **finances** and **mental health** and **University students**

will retrieve results where **all** of these terms appear somewhere within the text of a study.

Think of related search terms

However, only using these terms will limit the results you find as authors may use different terms to describe a concept.

Your next step is thus to find related terms for each of your concepts e.g.

finances- tuition fees; loans; rent

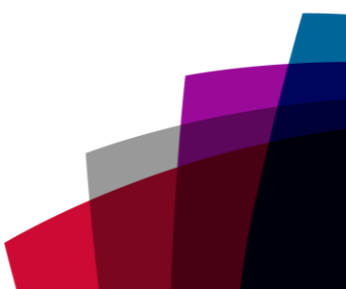
mental health- mental illness; mental disorders; depression

University students- undergraduates, graduates; postgraduates

These terms can be combined together using the **OR** operator
e.g.

finances or *tuition fees* or *loans* or *rent*

will retrieve results where **either** of these terms appear in the
text of a study.

A decorative graphic in the bottom right corner consisting of several overlapping, semi-transparent geometric shapes in shades of red, purple, and blue.

Search techniques

There are a number of techniques you can add to your search terms to either narrow or broaden your search.

These are known as:

- Truncation
- Phrase searching
- Wild cards



Truncation

Adding the * symbol at the end of a word stem will find variants of that word. It is useful for retrieving both the singular and the plural forms of a word in the same search, thus producing more results e.g.

If you enter the term **finances** into a database you will only retrieve results where that exact term appears.

If you enter **financ*** you will find both **finance** and **financial**



Phrase searching

Some databases automatically place the **AND** operator between your search terms. For example this search:

University students

would retrieve studies where the terms **University** and **students** appear separately within the text of a study.

If you wish to restrict your search to a phrase you would need to surround your terms with speech marks e.g.

"University students"

Wildcard

The Wildcard symbol # or ? allows you to find terms which have alternate spellings, such as those which have English and American English spellings e.g.

in English the term **organisation** is spelt with 's', whilst the American spelling **organization** is spelt with 'z'.

To find both, you would replace the 's' or 'z' with the wildcard symbol # e.g. **organi#ation**

[NOTE] This technique only works in databases available from the **EBSCOhost** (#) and **Ovid Online** (?) platforms

Database search functionalities

Combining your primary and related search terms together, using relevant search techniques, would produce a search like this:

financ* or "tuition fees" or loans or rent* and "mental health" or "mental illness" or "mental disorders" or depress* or anxiety and "University students" or undergraduates or graduates or postgraduates or Masters or doctora*

However, in many databases entering the search this way would not be the best option, as different databases have different functionalities.

Basic searching

Most databases will provide a basic search option (in some databases this may be the only option). This usually consists of one line for you to enter your search terms.

With this option you will usually get lots of results, many of which will be irrelevant. This is because the database will retrieve results where your search terms appear anywhere within the text of a study.

(Don't worry! Results are usually listed in order of relevance)

A decorative graphic in the bottom right corner consisting of several overlapping, semi-transparent geometric shapes in shades of red, purple, and blue.

In some databases you can enter your search like this and the database will understand the search you are asking it to perform.

financ* or "tuition fees" or loans or rent* and "mental health" or "mental illness" or "mental disorders" or depress* or anxiety and "University students" or undergraduates or graduates or postgraduates or Masters or doctora*

In other databases you may need to separate each concept of your search, using brackets, in order for the database to understand the search.

(financ* or "tuition fees" or loans or rent*) and ("mental health" or "mental illness" or "mental disorders" or depress* or anxiety) and ("University students" or undergraduates or graduates or postgraduates or Masters or doctora*)

Advanced searching

The Advanced Search option in databases will normally allow you to add a separate line for each concept of your search e.g.

financ* or "tuition fees" or loans or rent*	
AND ▼	"mental health" or "mental illness" or "menta
AND ▼	"University students" or undergraduates or s

Advanced searches will usually retrieve more relevant results than a basic search as they give you more control over your search.

This is because they allow you to choose where your search terms appear within a study by selecting a **field**.

financ* or "tuition fees" or loans or rer	AB Abstract or Author-Supplied Abstract ▼
AND ▼ "mental health" or "mental illne	AB Abstract or Author-Supplied Abstract ▼
AND ▼ "University students" or underg	AB Abstract or Author-Supplied Abstract ▼

The common fields you can select from are:

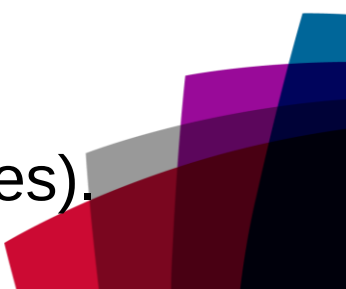
Title- selecting this field will retrieve results where your search terms appear in the title of a study.

Abstract- selecting this field will retrieve results where your search terms appear in the abstract (summary) of a study.

Keyword- selecting this field will retrieve results where your search terms appear frequently in a study.

Text- selecting this field will retrieve results where your search terms appear within the text of a study.

(we recommend using the Abstract field, in most cases).

A decorative graphic in the bottom right corner consisting of several overlapping, semi-transparent geometric shapes in shades of red, purple, and blue.

VIDEO DEMO



Comparison of search results without selecting search fields
and with selecting search fields

Search History

Some databases provide a Search History function.

With this function, each search you perform is added to your Search History e.g.

Search History/Alerts

[Print Search History](#) [Retrieve Searches](#) [Retrieve Alerts](#) [Save Searches / Alerts](#)

☐ Select / deselect all Search with AND Search with OR Delete Searches Refresh Search Results			
Search ID#	Search Terms	Search Options	Actions
☐ S3	 AB "university students" or undergraduates or graduates or postgraduates or Masters or doctora* or PhD	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	 View Results (273,492)  View Details  Edit
☐ S2	 AB "mental health" or "mental illness" or "mental disorders" or depress* or anxiety	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	 View Results (537,602)  View Details  Edit
☐ S1	 AB financ* or "tuition fees" or loans or rent*	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	 View Results (526,859)  View Details  Edit

The Search History allows you to perform different combinations of searches e.g.

Combining searches 1 AND 2 AND 3 will retrieve studies relating to finances and mental health and University students

S4  S1 AND S2 AND S3

Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects

 [View Results](#) (201)

Search modes - Boolean/Phrase

If you wanted to broaden your search you could just combine searches 1 AND 3 which would find studies not mentioning mental health

S5  S1 AND S3

Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects

 [View Results](#) (7,920)

Search modes - Boolean/Phrase

If you wanted to find studies relating to the UK you could perform another search and combine this with Searches 1 AND 2 AND 3

S7  S1 AND S2 AND S3 AND S6

Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects

 [View Results](#) (28)

Search modes - Boolean/Phrase

VIDEO DEMO



Using the Search History function



You can also edit searches within your Search history, for example, if you want to remove or add search terms.

S3  AB "university students" or undergraduates or graduates or postgraduates or Masters or doctora* or PhD

Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects

 [View Results](#) (273,492) | [View Details](#)  [Edit](#)

Search modes - Boolean/Phrase



Edit Search 

Search Terms

AB "university students" or undergraduates or
graduates or postgraduates or Masters or
doctora* or PhD

VIDEO DEMO



Editing a search in the Search History

Controlled vocabulary/Subject CityLibrary Heading searching

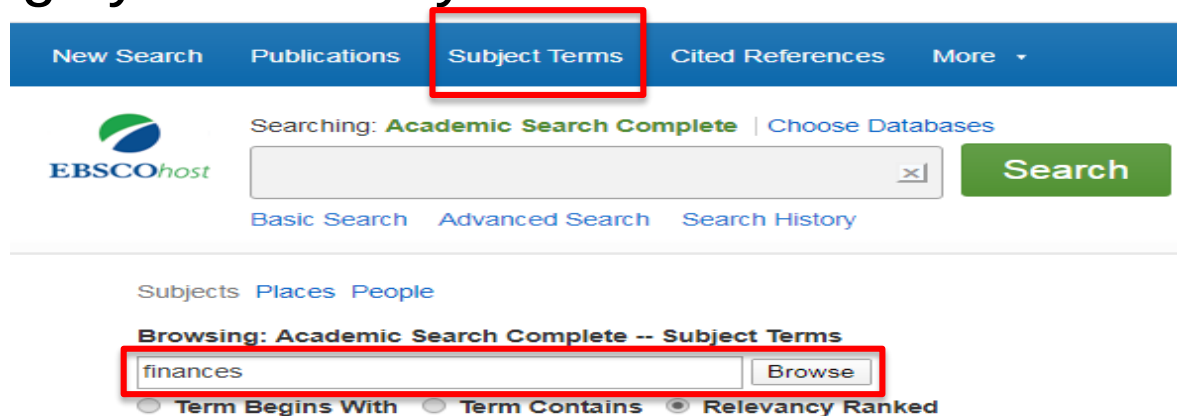
Controlled Vocabulary searching involves searching the index of databases to find studies categorised under a given subject.

This is looked upon as the most advanced form of literature searching as you rely upon search terms derived by the database itself to retrieve studies, rather than your own search terms.

(Most databases which perform this function can be found in the **EBSCOhost** and **Ovid Online** platforms).



When searching the index of a database for Subject Headings you can only enter one search term.



The screenshot shows the EBSCOhost search interface. At the top, a blue navigation bar contains links: 'New Search', 'Publications', 'Subject Terms' (highlighted with a red box), 'Cited References', and 'More'. Below this, the 'Searching: Academic Search Complete' section features a search bar with the text 'finances' (also highlighted with a red box) and a green 'Search' button. Below the search bar are links for 'Basic Search', 'Advanced Search', and 'Search History'. Further down, there are tabs for 'Subjects', 'Places', and 'People'. The 'Subjects' tab is active, showing 'Browsing: Academic Search Complete -- Subject Terms'. Below this, a search bar contains 'finances' and a 'Browse' button (both highlighted with a red box). At the bottom, there are radio buttons for 'Term Begins With', 'Term Contains', and 'Relevancy Ranked' (which is selected).

The database will retrieve the available Subject Heading(s) closest to the term you entered.

- ☐ FINANCIAL disclosure
- ☐ GOVERNMENT treasurers
- ☐ CORPORATE finance
- ☐ FINANCE ministers
- ☐ STUDENTS -- Finance
- ☐ BANK examination
- ☐ BANK compliance

Clicking on a Subject Heading will take you into the databases index where *broader*, *related* and *narrower* terms may be listed.

You can select as many of these Subject Headings as you feel are relevant.

☒ [STUDENTS – Finance](#)

Scope Note

Here are entered general works on the personal finances of students. Works on financing education are entered under "Education – Finance." [EPC]

Narrower Terms

☒ [STUDENT loan debt](#)

Related Terms

☐ [EDUCATIONAL finance](#)

Your search will be added into the databases Search History.

A decorative graphic in the bottom right corner consisting of several overlapping, semi-transparent geometric shapes in shades of red, purple, and blue.

VIDEO DEMO



Performing a Subject Heading search

You **may** need to perform more than one Subject Heading search for the same concept.

Another search term relating to student finances, for example, is **tuition fees**. As this was not listed as a Subject Heading under the previous search for **finances**, you would need to check if it is listed elsewhere in the databases index. If it is you can select it and it will be added to your Search History.

As the search term **rent** is also related to student finances you should also perform a separate Subject Heading search for that term as well.

VIDEO DEMO



Performing additional Subject Heading searches for the same concept



Combining your Subject Heading search with your own 'free text' search

Your Subject Heading search(es) should be combined with your own free text search using either the Basic or Advanced search options within the same database e.g.

The screenshot shows a search interface with the following elements:

- A text input field containing the search term: "financ* or \"tuition fees\" or loans or rer".
- A dropdown menu next to the input field, currently set to "AB Abstract or Author-Supplied Abstract".
- A green "Search" button.
- Below the first input, there are two more input fields, each preceded by an "AND" dropdown.
- Each of these two input fields has a "Select a Field (optional)" dropdown menu next to it.
- To the right of the second "AND" input field is a "Clear ?" link.
- At the bottom right of the form are two circular buttons with "+" and "-" signs.

This extra search is necessary because:

- a Subject Heading may have been mistakenly left out of the description of a study
- a particular search term may not be listed as a Subject Heading in the database you are searching

Your Subject Heading and free text searches, for the same concept, should be merged together using the **OR** operator in your Search History.

Search History/Alerts

[Print Search History](#) [Retrieve Searches](#) [Retrieve Alerts](#) [Save Searches / Alerts](#)

☒ Select / deselect all Search with AND Search with OR Delete Searches Refresh Search Results			
Search ID#	Search Terms	Search Options	Actions
☒ S4	AB financ* or "tuition fees" or loans or rent	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (506,034) View Details Edit
☒ S3	DE "RENT" OR DE "RENTAL housing" OR DE "LANDLORD-tenant relations"	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (9,001) View Details Edit
☒ S2	DE "UNIVERSITY tuition"	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (901) View Details Edit
☒ S1	DE "STUDENTS -- Finance" OR DE "STUDENT loan debt"	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (1,168) View Details Edit

This will give you your completed search for that concept.

Search History/Alerts

[Print Search History](#) [Retrieve Searches](#) [Retrieve Alerts](#) [Save Searches / Alerts](#)

☐ Select / deselect all Search with AND Search with OR Delete Searches Refresh Search Results			
Search ID#	Search Terms	Search Options	Actions
☐ S5	S1 OR S2 OR S3 OR S4	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (512,630) View Details Edit
☐ S4	AB financ* or "tuition fees" or loans or rent	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (506,034) View Details Edit
☐ S3	DE "RENT" OR DE "RENTAL housing" OR DE "LANDLORD-tenant relations"	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (9,001) View Details Edit
☐ S2	DE "UNIVERSITY tuition"	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (901) View Details Edit
☐ S1	DE "STUDENTS -- Finance" OR DE "STUDENT loan debt"	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (1,168) View Details Edit

VIDEO DEMO



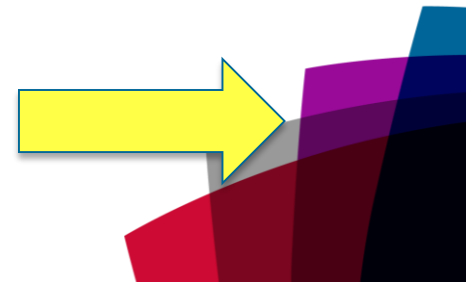
Merging Subject Heading and free text searches



Subject Heading and free text searches will need to be performed, and merged, for all the other concepts of your topic.

Once you have done this, your final search for each concept should be combined with the AND operator.

This will give you your final result.



Search History/Alerts

[Print Search History](#) [Retrieve Searches](#) [Retrieve Alerts](#) [Save Searches / Alerts](#)

☐ Select / deselect all

Search ID#	Search Terms	Search Options	Actions
☒	S15 S5 AND S9 AND S14	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (295) View Details Edit
☒	S14 S10 OR S11 OR S12 OR S13	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (309,671) View Details Edit
☒	S13 AB "University students" or undergrad	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (273,494) View Details Edit
☒	S12 DE "GRADUATE students" OR DE "DOCTORAL students" OR DE "DOCTORAL programs" OR DE "POSTDOCTORAL programs"	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (12,101) View Details Edit
☒	S11 DE "UNDERGRADUATES"	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (11,812) View Details Edit
☒	S10 DE "COLLEGE students"	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (44,662) View Details Edit
☒	S9 S6 OR S7 OR S8	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (613,948) View Details Edit
☒	S8 AB "mental health" or "mental illness" or "mental disorders" or depress" or anxiety	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (537,726) View Details Edit
☒	S7 DE "DEPRESSION in college students" OR DE "ANXIETY"	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (57,297) View Details Edit
☒	S6 DE "MENTAL health" OR DE "PSYCHOLOGICAL stress" OR DE "MENTAL illness"	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (161,851) View Details Edit
☒	S5 S1 OR S2 OR S3 OR S4	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (532,216) View Details Edit
☒	S4 AB financ" or "tuition fees" or "course fees" or loans or rent"	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (527,040) View Details Edit
☒	S3 DE "RENT" OR DE "PUBLIC housing rent" OR DE "RENTAL housing" OR DE "LANDLORD-tenant relations"	Expanders - Apply equivalent subjects Search modes - Boolean/Phrase	View Results (9,031) View Details Edit

Merged Subject Heading and free text terms relating to *University students*

Merged Subject Heading and free text terms relating to *mental health*

Merged Subject Heading and free text terms relating to *finance*

VIDEO DEMO



Combining the results from each concept of your search to achieve your final result



Filter/Limit options

Most databases will provide limit/filter options allowing you to make your search more specific to your needs.

These options vary from database to database but the most common filters include:

- Publication date
- Language
- Age group
- Publication type

VIDEO DEMO



[Limit/Refine options in EBSCOhost](#)



City, University of London
Northampton Square
London
EC1V 0HB
United Kingdom

T: +44 (0)20 7040 5060
E: department@city.ac.uk
www.city.ac.uk/department

