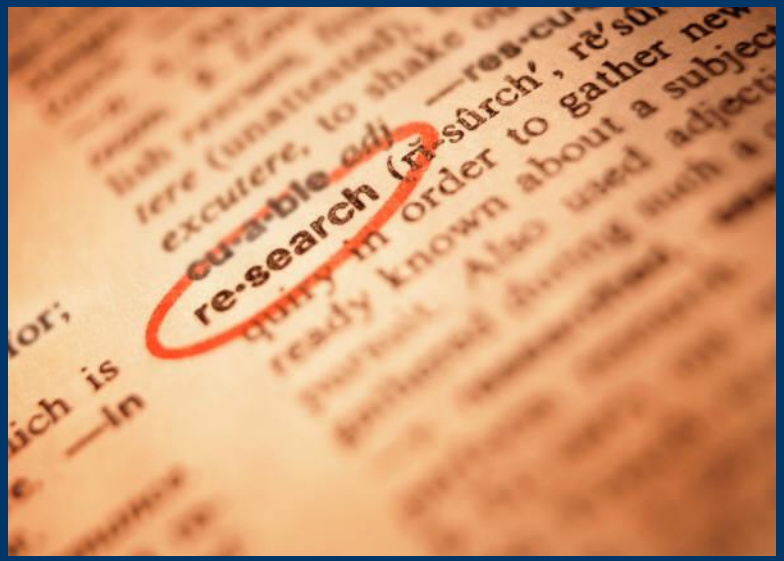
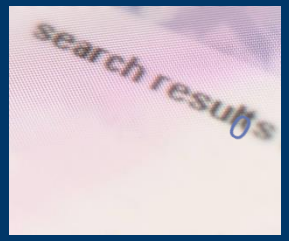
How to Choose Keywords for Research



Why do we need to choose keywords?

Whether you are using Google or library databases, search functions don't understand true meaning.



If you type in "capital punishment", the search engine doesn't understand that you are talking about the act of putting someone to death for a specific crime - all the search function is doing is searching for that exact formation of letters in titles, page tags, subject headings, abstracts, or texts of webpages on the internet or articles within a database.

So what does that mean for you?

Let's say the topic you were assigned is "Walmart paying workers lower than minimum wage."

If you type in

Walmart paying workers lower than minimum wage

…you will probably get a lot of results that discuss how Walmart pays workers more than minimum wage.

Why?

Words not Ideas

The search engine is looking for the exact words you typed in – not the idea that you had in mind.

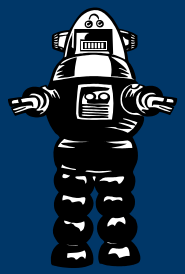
An article may say something to the effect of "Walmart is paying workers higher than the minimum wage which is resulting in lower turnover rates."

Because it contains all of your search words, it will be in your list of results and yet it doesn't discuss at all what you were looking for – just the opposite.

Remember, the search functions aren't searching for ideas – they are searching for words.

What can we do?

Until technology becomes so advanced that it can think for us, we will need to learn how to use the current functions to the best of our abilities.



To do this, we need to readjust how we think about searching.

We need to break our ideas down into keywords.

Choosing Keywords

Step 1: Identify your research topic.

Common sense should tell us that we need to know what we are looking for before we start looking for it.

Our research topic should begin very basic; for example: “Cell phone usage while driving is extremely dangerous.”

We don’t want to get into the specifics of when, how, why, etc. yet. Those details will surface as we do our research.

Choosing Keywords

Step 2: Locate the main concepts of your topic.

Your main concepts are usually going to be your nouns and verbs. In this case, we can also use “dangerous” as a concept.

“Cellphone usage while driving is extremely dangerous.”

Remember, you are looking for words that get at the idea of your topic.

We don’t need the “while” or “is” because those words could be used in any context in any article and they don’t really get at the idea behind our research.

Choosing Keywords

Step 3: Build keyword lists.

Different authors will use different terms to describe the same idea.

If we search for “capital punishment” and an author uses “death penalty” instead, we won’t get that article or webpage in our results list.

To make sure that we find all articles that are relevant to our topic, we need to come up with as many related terms as we can for our main concepts.

Make a column for each concept. Then jot down synonyms and related terms below each one:

Concept 1: Cellphone usage

Concept 2: Driving

Concept 3: Dangerous

Your lists don’t need to be overly long.
Shoot for two or three related terms or synonyms for each main concept.

Concept 1: Cellphone usage

Cell	Tweeting
Phone	Chatting
Mobile device	Apps
Texting	E-mail
Talking	Email
Calling	Voicemail

Concept 2: Driving

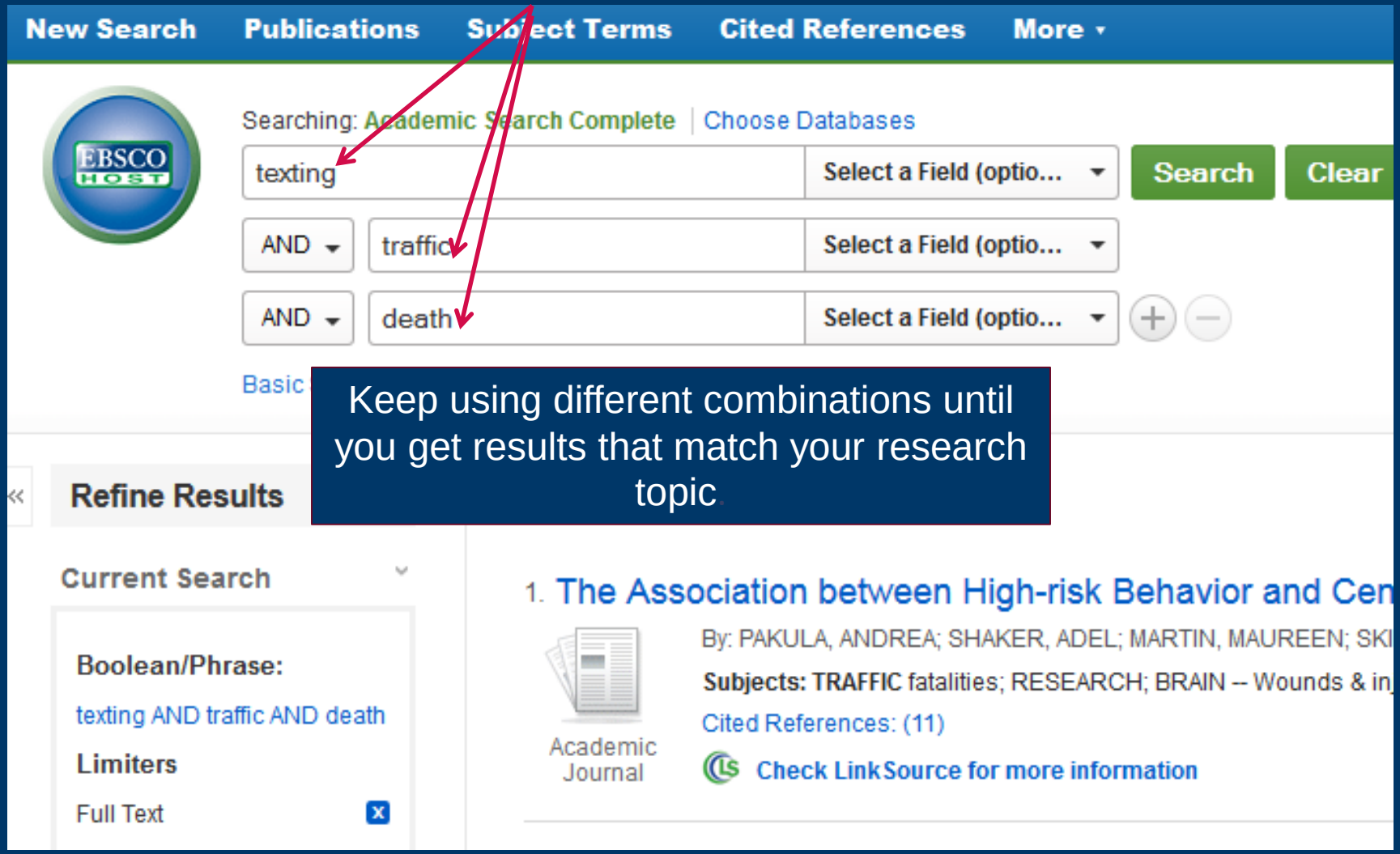
Car	Highways
Truck	Lights
Steering	Stop signs
Alert	Pedestrians
Attention	Traffic
Focus	

Concept 3: Dangerous

Crash
Accident
Fatality/Fatalities Death/Deaths
Injury

You can then use those terms as keywords to search databases and the internet for your research topic.

Try choosing one keyword/term from each column and see how you do.



Now it's your turn. 

Step 1: Write down your research topic.

Step 2: Underline your main concepts (usually at least 2).

Step 3: Make a chart with a column for each main concept.

- Try to come up with a synonym and list it beneath each main concept.
- Try to come up with one or two related terms and list them beneath each main concept.

Need some help? Contact your library.

LSC-Atascocita Library.
15903 West Lake Houston Pkwy, Houston, TX 77044

Phone: 832-775-0816

Email: Atascocita.Library@lonestar.edu

Chat: http://www.lonestar.edu/library/ata-library.htm

Or find for your library webpage here:
http://www.lonestar.edu/library/info