Formulating a Search Strategy

Example Scenario

You are interested in the use of vitamin C to prevent common cold.

Search Planning

Begin the search process by formulating a search question. The question should be precise, narrowly focused, and satisfy the information need. In this case, the search question could be: Can vitamin C be used to prevent a common cold?

In order to search successfully, break up your research question into a few key concepts. For instance, the aforementioned question can be broken down into two main concepts: (1) vitamin C and (2) Common cold.

There are several frameworks people use to structure research and search questions. The PICO framework (Patient, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome) is most popular and works especially well for treatment topics. In this scenario, we are using a more flexible model called “concept boxes” for less complex searches.

Combining Concepts

Once you have broken down the topic into its main concepts, you may combine these concepts using the Boolean operators: AND, OR, or NOT.

- Use **AND** to retrieve results where both terms occur in the same reference. **AND** narrows your search
- Use **OR** to group synonymous terms together and retrieve results that contain either or both of your search terms. **OR** broadens your search.
- Use **NOT** to remove unwanted terms from any set

Example of searches conducted using Boolean operators. The blue area represents the results that would be retrieved from each search:
To access CINAHL through the EBSCO platform, find CINAHL under the Databases section of the library homepage.

To access from home contact library for username and password.
Searching in CINAHL

Input your concepts one at a time

By entering your concepts separately, you are allowing CINAHL to match your terms to its own special vocabulary, known as CINAHL Subject Headings. Using Subject Headings will improve the accuracy of your search. Suggest Subject Terms box is selected automatically through default.

Note: Always try using CINAHL vocabulary first, but if you are unable to find an appropriate Subject Heading for your concept, you have the option to use keywords instead.

Understanding Subject Headings

After entering your first concept into the search box, you will be redirected to a page containing a list of relevant Subject Heading terms. Click the Scope icon next to a term to learn more about how and when the term should be used.
Check where the term falls within the Subject Heading vocabulary tree by clicking on the selected term itself.

Exploding and Major Concept

In some cases, you have the option to *Explode* your search. Clicking the *Explode* box will search your selected term and all narrower (related) terms listed below it in the Subject Heading tree. If you are unable to *Explode* your search, this means that the term you selected has no narrower (related) terms. "Ascorbic Acid" does not have any narrower terms within the hierarchical tree and therefore that box is grayed out.

Clicking the *Major Concept* box tells the database to retrieve only those citations in which your subject term is considered to be the main focus of the article. If you select the *Major Concept* box you might be eliminating any relevant results.

Search Term Builder

After selecting the term, click on "Search Database" to the right. Follow the same steps for all your terms/concepts.
Combine Your Concepts

After matching each of your search terms to CINAHL Subject Headings, you can combine the terms using Boolean operators. Simply select the searches you wish to combine from your Search History, located at the top of the page. You have the option to combine them using AND or OR.

Click on AND in order to retrieve results that contain both vitamin C AND common cold. Results are displayed on the right under the Search History.

You can now view your combined searches in your Search History, along with the number of results retrieved.

Using Limits

Limits can be used to focus your search to specific aspects of information. Scroll down to the Limit Your Results section to see a full list of limits available to narrow your search results.
Understanding Your Results

You can view the results of your search by scrolling down to the bottom of the page. Each result contains: title, author(s), journal information, and abstract (when available). To access full citation information, click its title in blue.

The left hand side of the page provides you with another list of Limiter tools if you wish to refine your results further.