Database Search Strategies for Psychology & Social Sciences Assignments

Learn strategies for searching online databases, such as Psychology Collections or Academic Search Complete, to find quality sources for assignments in counseling, psychology, human services, criminal justice or other social sciences disciplines. It is recommended that you open a database and try some searching. Use the topic you have selected for a class, or choose a topic of interest to you.

Database Basics

**Definition** A database is “a usually large collection of data organized especially for rapid search and retrieval (as by a computer).” The CityU library subscribes to a number of specialized databases to help you find articles, videos, transcripts, and other content to help you with your assignments.

**Data Fields and Records** These databases contain tens of thousands of articles, article abstracts and e-books. Each item is entered into the database using data fields, such as author, title, subject, document type and others. Using a preset data field allows searchers to conduct very specific searches because they can opt to search within particular fields. Each set of data fields make up a record. Example:

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Standardized Beck Depression Inventory-II scores for male veterans with chronic pain.

Authors: Lopez, Michael N., Neuropsychology Testing Laboratory, Veterans Affairs Health Care System, San Diego, CA, US, michael.lopez@va.gov

Pierce, Russell S., Neuropsychology Testing Laboratory, Veterans Affairs Health Care System, San Diego, CA, US

Gardner, Ricca D., Neuropsychology Testing Laboratory, Veterans Affairs Health Care System, San Diego, CA, US

Hanson, Richard W., Chronic Pain Program, Veterans Affairs Healthcare System, San Diego, CA, US

Address: Lopez, Michael N., VA Central California Health Care System, Neuropsychology Testing Laboratory, 2615 E. Clinton Avenue, Fresno, CA, US, 93703, michael.lopez@va.gov

Source: Psychological Services, Vol 10(2), May, 2013. Special issue: Returning Veterans

Publisher: U.S. Educational Publishing Foundation

ISSN: 1541-1659 (Print) 1930-140X (Electronic)

Language: English

Keywords: chronic pain, depression, factor analysis, male veterans, coping

Abstract: The Beck Depression Inventory II (BDI-II) has been suspected of overestimating depression in individuals that endure chronic pain. Using a sample (N = 345) of male military personnel enrolled in an outpatient treatment program, a factor analysis on the BDI-II Complaints factor along with 2 other factors we labeled "Negative Ruminations" and "Total Scores" were provided for each BDI-II factor score. Total score, and Total minus Sp score consistencies reliabilities (Gillmer-Feldt and alpha coefficients) for all scores were found acceptable. Item-total score correlations found that all of the BDI-II items were well correlated. We conclude that the normative data provided in this study should help clinicians interpreting BDI-II scores from chronic pain. (PsycINFO Database Record (c) 2013 APA, all rights reserved)

Subjects: Beck Depression Inventory; Chronic Pain; Coping Behavior; Major Depression; Factor Analysis; Human Males

Classification: Psychological & Physical Disorders (3200) Health Services (3000)

Population: Male

Location: US
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Search strategies - Keyword

**Definition** A keyword search looks for the words you type anywhere in a database record, including the full text. This makes it the most flexible way to search a database.

**Why use a keyword search?** Keyword searches are a good place to start your search in a database. One downside to a keyword search is that it can lead to an overwhelming number of articles.

**How to search by keyword** Simply enter a word or words into the database search boxes and click “search.” To get the most articles in your search, enter one word into each search box and connect single words using the word "AND." To get fewer articles, use short phrases in your search (see examples below that use the PsycINFO database, which is part of the Psychology Collections comprehensive psychology database).

**KEYWORD EXAMPLE 1: Get the most articles**

View this video example of a search in PsycINFO for "counseling" AND "ethics"

**KEYWORD EXAMPLE 2: Get fewer articles by using a phrase search.**

Putting quotation marks "" around two or more words ensures your search will retrieved articles that have that phrase and will exclude items that do not.

View this video example of a search for the phrase "counseling ethics"
NOTE: After you run a keyword search, use the options on the left side of the database to narrow by age, gender, etc., or to limit by full text or date.

Search strategies - Subject

Definition The online databases each have their own unique language, called subject terms, that are assigned to articles based on what the articles are about. While keyword searches look for the word or words anywhere in the article citation or in the full text, regardless of what the articles are about, subject searches look only in the set of words that have been assigned.

Why use a subject search? Using the database’s subject words in your searches eliminates the need for you to think of multiple synonyms describing your topic and often returns more relevant results than a simple keyword search.
Here is an example of an article citation in PsycINFO that shows which Subjects ("Applied Psychology"; "Counseling"; etc.) have been assigned to the article:

1. Effects of ethics education in counseling on college students majoring in applied psychology
   Zhai, Jing-Bo; Ji, Jian-Lin; Chinese Mental Health Journal, Vol. 22, No. 5 (September 2018), pp. 411-418, [Journal Article]
   **Subjects:** Applied Psychology; Counseling; Professional Ethics; Psychology Education; Psychotherapy; Adulthood (18 yrs & older)

**How to search by subject** For tips on how to identify subject words to improve your search results, click on the database’s “Help?” link or try the following strategy:

**Begin with a keyword search** then scan the list of recommended search words listed with your results. You will find this list in the left menu in EBSCO databases.

Keep track of the subject words you think are relevant to your topic. Begin a new search using one or more of these words and select “Subject” from the drop down menu next to the search box.

Watch this example video showing a subject search.
Search strategies - Author

Why use an author search? Author searches are useful if you want to find more works by an expert on your topic.

How to search by author

1) If you find an article you like, click on the author’s name to run a search for more of that author’s articles.

*Leadership Development for Adolescents: A Case Study.*

Authors: Cox, Amie

Source: Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin; Spring 2011, Vol. 77 Issue 3, p13-16, 4p

2) Enter the author’s name (last name, first name) into a search box. Select “Author” from the dropdown menu.

Search strategies – Title

Definition A title search will look for keywords or phrases only within the article or document title field.

Why use a title search? This type of search is useful for finding a specific article or for narrowing your results to articles with specific words in the title.
**How to search by title**

1. **Enter a keyword in the search box** and select “Document title” from the dropdown menu. Then, click “Search.”

   - **Example:** Enter “higher education” and select “Document title.”

   ![Search Results](image)

   *Use a TITLE search to locate articles with specific words in the title. For example, note that "higher education" is highlighted in the article titles below.*

2. **If you know the title of the article you want:** Copy and paste the title into the search box and select “Document title” from the dropdown menu. If the article title is long, it is fine to copy and paste the first 4-6 words into the search box.

   ![Search Results](image)

   *Copy and paste an article title or part of the title into the database search box. Select "TI Title" in the dropdown menu.*
Search strategies - Use reference lists

Definition Scanning the footnotes or reference sections of works that are important to your research topic.

Why use a footnote or reference search? If you find articles or books that are on target, it is likely you will find similar articles or books listed in the footnotes or references.

How to search Look for the “Cited References” link, which will take you to the references cited in a particular article.

Need more help? Ask a Librarian!

Check "Cited References" to see a list of references, some of which might be available in full text