

Using on-line search engines

Step 1: Login

Logging in is usually done in one of two ways. The first way is a "local login", in which you are already on-campus or in the main system and can simply get into the search databases. The second way is a "remote login", in which you are off-campus or not on the main system and need to do some extra step to verify that you have permission to use the system.

Step 2: Databases

Next, choose your search database or databases. The best available search engine for psychology majors is PsychINFO. Other good databases are: ERIC, Social Sciences Abstracts, Academic Search Elite, and Wilson Select Full Text.

Step 3: Search

Once you are in a search database, you are ready to conduct your search. The following information can be applied to all search engines but we will focus on PsycINFO for now.

Every search engine prompts you for a keyword. Usually the database uses "basic searches" as the default setting where you can place keywords in a blank box. But there is usually an "advanced search" as well. In advanced search, you may specify much more than a keyword, including Author & Title. Therefore, I recommend using Advanced Searches always.

A keyword alone can help or hurt. For example, let's say you wanted to research 'attachment theory', the relational construction between a caregiver and an infant. If you type in "attachment" in the "Search for" box, and keep it as a keyword, your results will elicit over 5000 articles. Not only is that too many articles for a mortal human being to look at, but many of the articles are not relevant to the topic, including this search result:

"The effect of omitted milking on the behaviour of cows in the context of cluster attachment failure during automatic milking."

Clearly, cow behavior is vastly different from the caregiver-infant bond topic.

Therefore, you need to think about what terms to use and how to use them. I recommend either putting in more than one term as keywords, or use one term for the title or a mixture of terms as keywords and titles. One way to focus your search is to type in two keywords, combined using the word "and". "And" means the search engine will select those articles that have both keywords.

(If you need to broaden your search on an obscure topic, use two or more keywords combined using the word "or". "Or" means the search engine will select those articles that have either 1 keyword OR the other. You may also use the word "not". "Not" means the search engine will excludes terms so that each article retrieved does not contain the term following the word "not". For example, you could type "attachment NOT cows" and no cows will show up.)

Let's redo the attachment search. This time, if you type in:

Search for: *attachment* in *Title* (see ** below for how to do this)
and: *children* in *Title*

(then click on the GO button)

You get between 200-300 search results, and no cows!

****To change the default from keyword to title, click in the keyword box and select TITLE**

Still, you might want to specify things even further to narrow down your search, if your database allows you to do so. PsycINFO provides results from (a) journal articles, (b) authored books (c) edited books (d) chapters and (e) dissertation abstracts.

Some classes may only want you to use journal articles (consult your professor) and not secondary resources such as books. Dissertation abstracts cause great difficulty. Every time a graduate student completes a Ph.D., his or her dissertation abstract is published. The actual dissertation document may not be available to the general public. Unless you know the person or have some way to contact him or her, you may not get a copy. Even if you have a way to contact the person, many dissertations are 200-500 pages long!! Wait for the document to be published.

Therefore, a good way to eliminate unnecessary citations in your search results is to limit the type of document. To do so, go to:

"Limit search by: Document Type Phrase", click on the box that reads "No Limit" and select the appropriate filter, in this case "Journal articles".

If we redo our "attachment" search with the same terms but restrict the results to journal articles only, the results are now 100-125 journal articles, and still no cows.

Keep in mind, the better you are at selecting keywords and reducing search parameters, the easier it will be to research a topic.

Step 4: Results

You now have several references/citations listed that are related to your topic. Read each title and if you think the article may be helpful to you, click on the highlighted title. You will then reach a new page with more detailed information about that reference. On this page you will find information such as title, author, journal/book title, and abstract. Read the abstract. If you think this is a good article for you to read, then print out this page and go get the article from your university library (or order it through interlibrary loan). You may also check to see if the article is available through databases that have full text articles. Academic Search Elite, and Wilson Select Full Text are two examples of full text databases. Instead of going to the library to retrieve your article, you can just print it from the website. Caution: Some full text databases do not legibly print tables or figures from the original article and may thus be useless.

After you do this with one reference, click on the back tab of your web browser to get back to your list of references. Continue with the next title on the list, repeating the procedure.