



# Search Strategy Checklist

## Too much information

- ✓ **Try looking at an irrelevant record from your search.** Can you figure out why you were given this record? Did you use a word that may have multiple meanings, and was thus misunderstood by the database? Databases don't understand context, so you need to tell it *exactly* what you want. See if you can use a more specific word or include additional words to narrow your search.
- ✓ **Use limiters.** Can you narrow your search to randomized controlled trials (RCTs)? Looking for studies specifically on women? Or the elderly? Or are you getting a lot of articles in Chinese, but you need them to be in English? Limits can help you narrow your results to pinpoint what it is you are really looking for. Play around with the limit options to see if that helps narrow your results in a positive way.
- ✓ **Use the Boolean operator NOT.** Using NOT can help you get rid of words that may be tarnishing your search. But be careful with this! Using NOT can remove relevant results, so make sure the word you are removing is one that would not appear *at all* in a relevant result.

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- ✓ **Are your keywords spelled correctly?** Some databases will suggest new words if you spell them incorrectly, but not all of them do. Misspelling a keyword is the easiest way to ruin a perfectly good search
- ✓ **Use alternative terms.** Sometimes, you just aren't using the right words. One way to get around this is to use the database's built-in thesaurus. This will ensure you are using the right vocabulary to get the most relevant results. If you have alternate keywords, you can also try them out to see if you get different results.
- ✓ **Don't use natural language.** Most databases don't recognize natural language – you have to dumb it down to a set of identifiable keywords.
- ✓ **Broaden your search.** Sometimes there just isn't very much research on a specialized topic. In these cases, you might consider broadening your search.
  - **Very broad:** Hybrid cars
  - **Broad:** Benefits of hybrid cars
  - **Narrow:** The environmental impact of hybrid cars
  - **Very narrow:** Hybrid cars and their impact on smog reduction