
Search methodology - A general guide

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The information searching process

Searching for information is a process in several steps. These steps, along with some good advice to simplify the information searching process, are presented in this guide to search methodology. It is useful to think of information searching as a circular process, since you may need to go back and make changes along the way.

Initially, consider *what* kind of information you are looking for, what questions do you want answered? Which search terms do you need to use to find what you are looking for? *Where* to search depends on what kind of material you are looking for, books, pictures, academic articles? *How* to search, i.e. search methodology, is described on a general level in this guide. Guides covering specific databases, accessible through Konstfack library, can be found on the [library's website](#).

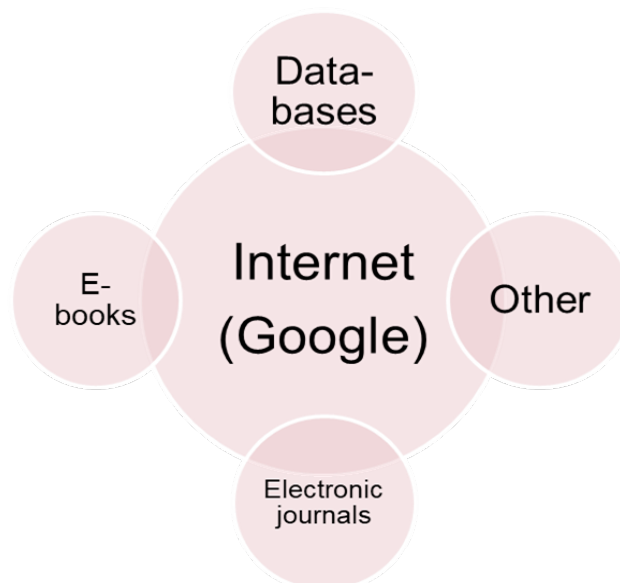
Once you have found material on your topic of interest, it is time to reflect on what you have found. Does the material answer your questions? Do you need additional or other types of information? If so, you can revise your information searching process, perhaps use other search terms and combine these in other ways or search different databases.

The library is happy to answer your questions or provide additional support in your information searching process. You can also book [search tutorial](#) on the library's website.

Good luck!

Google or databases?

There are different ways to find and access information. The everyday way is usually to google. This can be a good start to get an idea of a topic and to find good keywords to use to search further. However, there is a lot of material that is not accessible solely by using Google, such as scholarly journals or e-books that the library subscribes to. You may find an interesting academic article through Google, but when you try to read it, you come across a so-called paywall on the journal's website. The purpose of this is to restrict access to the content for non-paying visitors. Instead, you can use the library's resources to find the article, in print or electronic, or get help ordering a copy of the article from another library.



When searching the internet using for example Google, you will find a lot, but far from everything.

What is a database?

A database is a searchable collection of information organized in such a way it can be easily retrieved. In some databases you can search for academic journal articles, in others for books, pictures or videos. Some databases cover specific subjects, such as art and design, while others are broader and cover more subjects (multidisciplinary).

Accessing databases at Konstfack

Konstfack library subscribes to a number of databases, which you can access through computers on site at Konstfack. As a student or staff at Konstfack, you also access the databases from home.

The library's website has a [list of databases](#). Simply click the name of the database you want to search, enter your credentials in the login box that appears on the screen and you will access the databases.

Journal articles

Databases mostly constitutes of academic journal articles, written by researchers, for other researchers. Most often these articles have undergone an academic quality assessment (so-called peer review, see below) before being published in an academic journal.

There are essentially two types of academic articles:

Original article: an article that presents new results from studies/ research project

Review articles: a critical evaluation of already published studies/results (original articles).

An academic article is often structured in a certain way:

Abstract: a short summary of the article where the aim, method, results, and conclusions are presented. Oftentimes you will find keywords here which describe what the article is about.

Introduction: a background description. For example, aim, question at issue and what limitations have been made could be presented here.

Method: an accurate description of the method (s) used. These should help the reader understand the research process and provide sufficient information to repeat the study at hand.

Results: a description of the results of the study. Even if an initial hypothesis is refuted, results should be reported.

Discussion: the findings of the study are discussed, as well as the methodological approach and how the results found relate to previous and possible future research within the field.

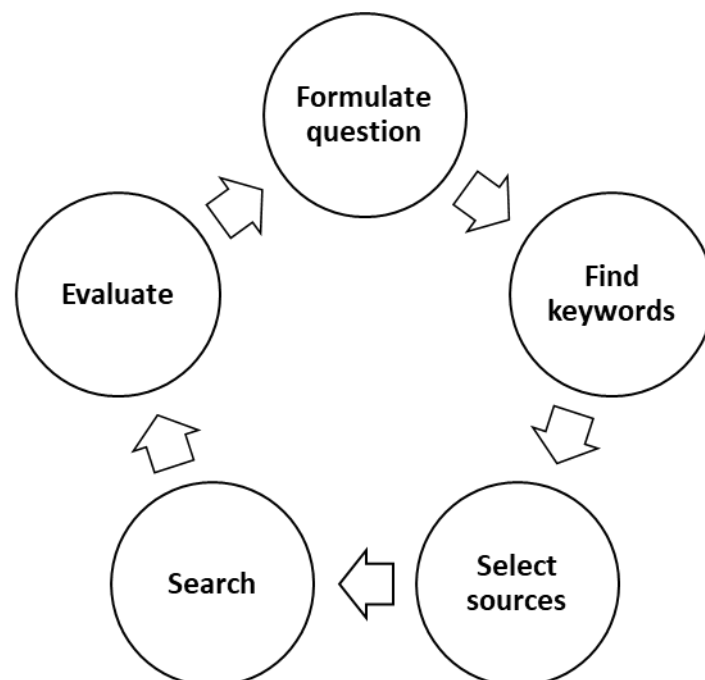
References: a list where all the documents mentioned in the article are listed according to a specific reference system. Through this bibliography the reader should be able to return to the sources if desired.

Peer review

Peer review is the process by which other researchers (referees) within the same field read and evaluate an article to determine its suitability for publication in an academic journal. The purpose of the peer review process is to maintain good quality, improve results and provide credibility. In most databases you can filter your search results to exclude material that has not undergone peer review. Academic journals usually state on their web pages if they practice peer review before publishing articles.

The searching process

When you search for information in a structured way, you go through several different steps which can be illustrated as a cycle:



Different steps in the information searching process

Formulating the question

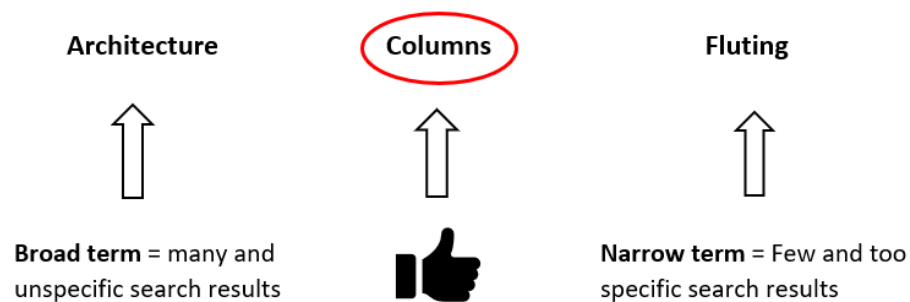
The starting point in the process of searching information is often to formulate one or more questions that you want answered. An overall question can sometimes be broken down into several sub-questions. A good search query should be neither too general (you will find too much material) nor too narrow (you will not find enough material).

Finding search terms

Based on your search query, you should come up with search terms. Opt for the central, significant concepts in your search query, usually they are nouns. Think creatively about these search terms and find synonyms and related concepts that capture what you are looking for. The search language in most databases is English, therefore, the search terms must also be in English. This also applies if you want material in other languages.

Example 1:

If you are interested in what distinguishes the columns of the various Greek architectural orders from one another it might not be a good idea to search for neither *architecture* nor *fluting**, but try *columns*:



*fluting = the characteristic vertical hollow grooves on a column

Example 2:

Based on the search query below, we try to find significant search terms:

How is a sustainability perspective present in the school's handicraft teaching?

Search terms for a **sustainability perspective**:

Sustainability, Sustainable development, Environmental aspects, Sustainability, Sustainable design, Recycling, Environmental aspects, Environmental impact...

Search terms for **handicraft teaching**:

Handicraft, Handicraft teaching, Handicraft teacher, Sloyd, Handicraft education, Woodwork, Needlework, Craft education...

Select sources

Once you have found search terms, it is time to choose *where* to search. Konstfack library subscribes to several databases within different subjects. Choose database based on what topic you are interested in and what type of material you are looking for:

Academic Search Premier Multidisciplinary database with access to more than 4,000 academic journals

Art and Architecture Source Almost 1000 journals in art, design, and architecture

ARTstor Image database, art history

Artikelsök Covers Swedish newspaper and journal articles, dating back 30 years in time

Design and Applied Arts Index Reference database in design, craft, and architecture

ERIC Education

Image Quest Image database

JSTOR Electronic journals, humanities & social sciences

Kanopy Streaming service that provides access to a variety of documentaries and feature films

Taylor & Francis Multidisciplinary database with access to more than 2000 journals

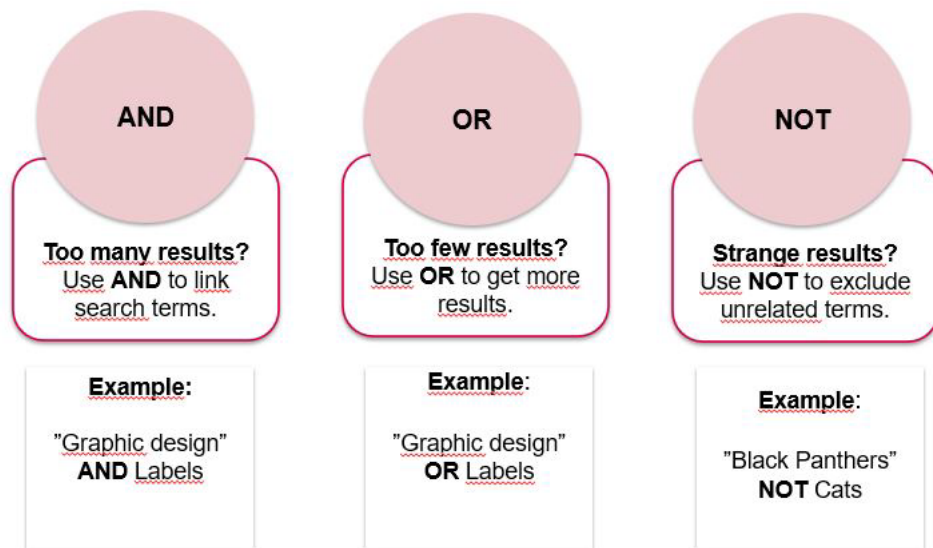
Utbildningsradion / NE Play Educational TV and radio programs

Search

When searching databases, you can combine your search terms in different ways to capture what you are interested in and thus get as relevant search results as possible. How to do this is described below, as well as how you can broaden or refine your search results in order to find the material that best answers your search query.

Boolean operators

Boolean operators are search commands used in many databases. By combining different search terms with the words **AND**, **OR** or **NOT**, you can narrow or expand your search:



Truncation

Sometimes you want to search different varieties of a word in the same search. We can do this by using *truncation*. This means that we replace the ending of a word with an asterisk (*), retrieving search results containing what is in front of the asterisk, but with different endings. In this way, truncation can be used to broaden a search and get more search results:

Example 1:

If we are using the search term *architect*, we might also want to find *architects*, *architecture* and *architectural*. Searching for *architect** will retrieve search results containing all the above variants of the word.

Another way to use truncation is to ensure that your search results cover both British and American spelling of a specific word:

Example 2:

A search for *theat** retrieves both theatre (British English) and theater (American English)

Phrase search

If we want to search for a term that consists of several words, we put these within quotation marks. A search for *"graphic design"* retrieves search results on that particular phrase, where the two words are next to each other in specified order, rather than search results where the two words *graphic* and *design* appear independently of each other. A phrase search thus narrows a search and makes it more precise.

Free text search vs. subject term search

In the database interface you often see a simple search box (*basic search*) first. To perform a basic search, you can enter one or more search terms and search in several fields of the description of an article at the same time, such as *title*, *author* or *abstract*.

If you want to direct your search to a specific field, such as *title*, *abstract* or *author*, you can use an *advanced search* form and select in which field to search, using a drop-down menu. This advanced search form can also be used to combine different search terms using *Boolean operators* (see above).

Both these ways of searching are called *free text search*.

Articles in databases are indexed. This means that a subject expert, from a controlled vocabulary (a list of subject terms, also known as *thesaurus*), has selected, and tagged the articles with terms that correspond to the content.

As subject terms from the database's thesaurus have been used throughout to describe the articles in the database, a so-called *subject term search* may facilitate to find relevant material.

A *free text search* often yields more but less specific search results than a *subject term search*. A subject term search only retrieves search results for articles tagged with the specific subject term searched for. The articles you obtain by subject term search has been recognized to be about the exact subject term you searched for and therefore often gives more relevant search results than a free text search. Free text search is mainly used when a subject term search does not give any relevant search results because subject terms are missing for a certain topic or phenomenon.

Refine search results

Sometimes a search generates plenty of search results, and sometimes quite few. If you retrieve more search results than possible to go through, you can use different methods to narrow the search.

One way is to use more precise search terms, or to combine terms with the AND operator (see above). Another way is to filter your results using the database feature *Refine your results* (or similar) which you will find next to the list of search results. Common filters are peer review (see above) which excludes articles that has not undergone the scholarly peer review process, or to limit your search results to a certain geographical area or articles within certain subject areas.

If you have not retrieved enough search results, you can try searching for broader, more general, search terms, combining several search terms with the operator OR (see above) or consider whether there is another database which better fits the topic you are looking for.

Save search results

Many databases offer the opportunity to save search results in a folder, from where it is possible to retrieve them again later. To do this you need an account for the database. Mostly, one can be created easily and free of charge in the database.

Next to the list of search results, there is often a link (*Add to folder*) or an icon in the shape of a folder with a plus sign on it, which you click to save an article in the folder. Note that you must be logged in to your database account to save the content of the folder between search sessions.

Access the material

In some cases, you get access to the articles you searched for directly on the screen, such as a journal article in PDF format. In other cases, you will find a reference stating where the material you searched for is published. The reference states in which journal, which issue, what year and on which pages the article can be found:

Example:

Jessica Hemmings (2019) *Floppy Cloth: Textile Exhibition Strategies Inside the White Cube*, TEXTILE, 17:4, 412-434, DOI: 10.1080/14759756.2019.1588688

On the library's website, you will find a [searchable list of all journals](#) that the library subscribes to. Here you can search for a journal's title and see if Konstfack has access to it and in what form (printed or electronic). Should the library not have access to the journal you are looking for, or the issue you need you can contact the library and we will help you order copies from another library.

Evaluate

Once you have searched for material, the next step is to take a closer look at it to assess whether it is useful or not.

Example:

Is the material you retrieved reliable, accurate and relevant to answer your search query? Based on the questions below, you will get an idea of what kind of material you have found, and evaluate whether it is suitable for your purposes:

- Who published the material?
- What is the purpose of the material?
- Who is the material aimed at?
- Has the material been reviewed (undergone a peer review process, see above) before it was published?
- Does the material contain a list of references, and if so, are the references relevant?

Based on the material you have retrieved, you will understand whether you need to rephrase your search query, find other (wider/narrower) search terms and if you have searched the right databases. Based on the material found, you can also get new perspectives, find other search terms that can be useful, and perhaps modify your search based upon these. You can also look at the list of references in the material you have searched for, among these there may be material that is of interest to you.