

Library Research Tips

American River College

How do you get better at doing library research?

The best thing you can do is adopt a **researcher's mindset** - be patient and persistent yet never quite satisfied. Try a bunch of searches and keep trying new ones until you start to find what you want. Even then, keep looking. It's also important to use **good search terms**.

Here are a few techniques you can use to improve your search terms and search results:

- **Be patient with yourself and with the research process.**
You probably won't find the exact information you want on your first search - and that is totally OK – even librarians almost never do! That's part of the process. Don't stress if your first search doesn't turn up what you were hoping for. Good research takes time - try out lots of different search terms. Don't settle for your first set of results.
- **Look beyond the first page.** Click on to pages two, three, four, etc and see what's there. You can find lots of good stuff this way.
- **Remember: It never hurts to try something.**
Don't worry about coming up with the perfect search terms. Just try stuff. It can't hurt to try. Librarians try out all kinds of wacky search terms before they start to figure out what the best ones are for a topic.
- **Be creative: think of ways to say your topic differently.**
Let's say you're looking for info about global warming. You'll also want to try a search for climate change, right? Same goes for nearly every topic - there are almost always several different ways to describe the same thing.
- **Always be on the lookout for better search terms.**
Found an article that's pretty good? Are there any phrases it uses that you hadn't thought of? Write those down and try them as search terms.
- **Use "keywords" rather than "natural language" searching, especially in library databases.**
Natural language searching is like the way we speak. You type in questions or sentences just like you'd say them -- many of us search Google this way and it often works. But it's worthwhile to also try keyword searching. Keyword searching is when you pull out just the key concepts and search for those words alone. Let's say you're wondering about the Chinese approach to teaching mathematics in high school. With a "natural language" search, you might search something like:
 - "what is the Chinese approach to teaching mathematics in high school" or

- “how do they teach math in China?”

With keyword searching, you would try something like:

- China math high school or
- Chinese math instruction or
- Mathematics education China

You definitely want to try keyword searches in most library databases - it never hurts to try a natural language search, but they often don't work well.

- **Learn more.**

I think the ability to research well also comes from reading broadly and learning about lots of different kinds of topics. Read books for fun. Go down some Wikipedia rabbit holes. Listen to podcasts. Follow some reputable news outlets on Facebook. If you hear something mentioned in conversation but don't know much about it, find out more - be curious. By constantly learning new things about the world, you will naturally become a better researcher.

- **Ask for help if you're stuck.** That's what librarians are here for -- we have years of practice doing research and talking with a librarian can help get you un-stuck and back on the right track. Librarians are good at coming up with search terms. :) You could also try talking with a friend, partner, sibling, parent, instructor, or co-worker about your research quest. It's amazing what other people can come up with that you somehow never thought of!

- **Don't discount serendipity.**

According to Google's dictionary, serendipity means *“the occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way.”* The idea of serendipity in research -- in other words, finding totally awesome information by chance, is well-known among librarians and has been studied. This is why browsing the book stacks is such a cool thing -- sometimes you just happen across a book that gives you precisely what you need, or one that totally changes your thinking. Keep an open mind to serendipity when you're researching online as well. Sometimes the universe just gives you exactly what you were looking for even when you weren't exactly looking for it. :)