

This guide gives brief information on how to define your search topic to create an efficient and comprehensive literature search. More details can be found on the Library Help webpages at www.lshtm.ac.uk/library/help/help.html

Why should I do this?

In medicine, thousands of new pieces of information are published every day. There are millions of new journal articles and books published every year. This can lead to something called ‘information overload’ – where there is so much information available that you become overwhelmed by it all and can’t possibly have enough time to read it. Therefore you must be very specific when searching for information.

If you need to find information on a topic, the first thing you need to do is decide what your topic is. Then you need to decide what type of information would be the best for you. This sounds obvious, but many people don’t spend enough time thinking about it.

Define your subject

When I talk to people about their research, I ask them what their topic is. This sounds an easy question but is one which many people have problems answering. Here are some things you should spend some time thinking about.

- How do you define each of the concepts involved? For example, if you are interested in problem drinkers, how are you deciding who belongs in that group?
- How wide do you want to cast your search? For example, if you are interested in SARS do you only want papers which discuss SARS or are you interested in other similar respiratory conditions? Are you only interested in humans or in birds as well?
- Are you only interested in a particular group of people? You may want to limit to particular age groups, ethnic groups or geographical locations. If you are interested in a health issue in a particular country, are you only interested in information from that country or from a wider area?

Define the information types you need

Once you have a clear idea of your topic, you next need to think about what type of information you will need. Think about:

- Are there particular study methodologies you are interested in?
- Do you only want items written in English, or can you read other languages too? Will this have an impact on the comprehensiveness of your literature search?



- Do you want to include grey literature? Grey literature is not material that is not formally published and includes items such as government and NGO reports.
- Do you want to include details of current research which hasn't been published yet, or research written for a PhD?
- What time period are you interested in? Do you want information published in the last 10 years or the last 100?

Tips for defining your topic

1. Turn your search topic into a question or series of questions you are trying to answer. Write the question down.
2. What type of information will you need to look for to answer this question? RCTs? NGO reports? Methodological studies? Something else?
3. Do you have any geographical/ethnic/age related limits to your search?
4. What time limit do you have on the information? Does it have to be published in the last 5 years or do you want a historical perspective?

Example

You want to find information on whether glaucoma screening is cost effective.

Question you need to answer: Is open angle glaucoma screening cost effective?

Type of information required: Journal articles

Other important limits: Only interested in UK

Time limit: None

As you continue your searching and learn more about your subject, your search question(s) may change. If you are conducting a search for an ongoing project, remember to periodically update your search questions if required.