Slide 1

Search Strategies

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FONDREN LIBRARY

Have open before presentation:

- Library home page
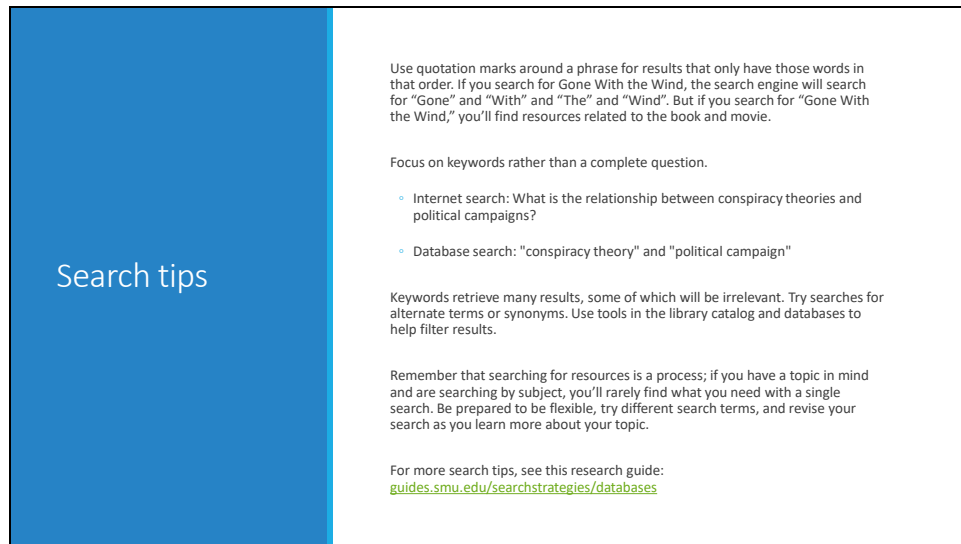- PPT slides

Slide 2

Let's talk about how you look for resources when you start your research. Grab a piece of paper or an open file on your computer and write down your answers to these two questions. (Give a few minutes for attendees to consider and respond to the questions.)

OK, let's talk about where you look for information. Where? (Library website, Google, Google Scholar, databases, other). Discuss the pros and cons of these places – Google/Wikipedia can be good for doing background searches, but it's not the best when looking for scholarly resources. Library everything search is helpful when you have an exact title, but it can give a lot of results when you are looking for a general topic. Databases can be great when you have a subject in mind and want the latest research. Considering WHERE to search is a part of the strategy for your search.

Now, search terms. Who can give me a topic and the terms you'd use to search for it? How did you come up with that term or phrase? Is it a question, written in natural language? Is it just a targeted phrase? If you're searching in Google, a question can be enough, but that doesn't often work well in library catalogs or databases. So one of the things we'll discuss today is how to determine a word or phrase for your search that will help to target your searches better.

Use quotation marks around a phrase for results that only have those words in that order. If you search for Gone With the Wind, the search engine will search for "Gone" and "With" and "The" and "Wind". But if you search for "Gone With the Wind," you'll find resources related to the book and movie.

Focus on keywords rather than a complete question.

- Internet search: What is the relationship between conspiracy theories and political campaigns?

- Database search: "conspiracy theory" and "political campaign"

Search tips

Keywords retrieve many results, some of which will be irrelevant. Try searches for alternate terms or synonyms. Use tools in the library catalog and databases to help filter results.

Remember that searching for resources is a process; if you have a topic in mind and are searching by subject, you'll rarely find what you need with a single search. Be prepared to be flexible, try different search terms, and revise your search as you learn more about your topic.

For more search tips, see this research guide:
guides.smu.edu/searchstrategies/databases

So here are some things to remember as you search, especially in databases. Quotation marks help to search for a specific phrase – if you're searching a library catalog or a database, make sure to use them to look for a phrase or idea that has multiple words, like "conspiracy theory." Note that these systems don't process searches the same way that Google does; you have to think in keywords or key terms. Note that phrasing for the database search has "AND" – that's called a Boolean search. You can also structure searches like "college students" OR "university students". And even exclude a topic by saying "this" NOT "that"

And remind yourself that research is a process. You may look for resources, find a couple, and then need to learn more about what you found through another background search. You may even find that as you begin writing, you want another resource that can underscore a new point that you have for your paper. Remember to be flexible and use your search as a way to explore and learn more about your topic.

To begin with, I'm going to take you through the process that I might do as I work on a research paper. Let's say I have been assigned to write about conspiracy theories. I don't know what I might want to write about, so I do a Google background search for conspiracy theories. Hey! Wikipedia has a list of conspiracy theories. Let's see if any sound interesting. As a parent, I've heard about anti-vaxxers, but I don't know any specifics. When I look through this, I see that Andrew Wakefield was the doctor that did the disproved study that linked vaccinations to autism, so now I have a person to search for along with some key terms, like vaccination and autism. I make a note that this might be connected to measles outbreaks and conspiracies in Nigeria and Pakistan, in case I want to learn more about that, and that there have been bombings at vaccine clinics.

Now I've got some search terms for the library catalog.
- Open library search and search for "Andrew Wakefield" and "vaccine". Note the quotation marks, so that I'm not looking for just any Andrew. (Does anyone remember what this structure of a search is called? Boolean)
- Show how to do the same search in the Advanced Search form, which can help to structure the Boolean search and categorize search terms like title, author, subject, etc. Show the drop-down menu that gives the options for AND/OR/NOT.
- Show how to limit results by type of resource
    - I want to pick online resources,
    - Excluding a category like "reviews" (I don't want to read a review of the resource, but the actual resource)
    - Limiting by copyright year.

- Remember that scholars and academics may use different terms when writing articles and tagging them with keywords. I'm learning new possible key terms as I search – Note the title that refers to "vaccine hesitancy". I write that down in my notes as another possible search term.
- That book was published this year. It might give some good information on the topic that is recent. I open the listing to learn more about the resource. Show participants how it gives an overview of the title, including how to open the resource online, and links to other listings through author and subject header. Show how each subject header reflects a different component of the topic.

So I like this book, but I want to find some articles too, since I know that books take a while to publish, while articles are published more quickly. I know that librarians at SMU Libraries have built research guides on a variety of topics to help you search databases by subject. These can help you focus your search within the scholarly publications for a chosen field. Let's find a research guide that might be useful to learn about anti-vaccination theories.

Go back to the library home page and show the link for research guides.
- Open the Biology guide.
- Open PubMed.
- Do the same search that I did in the library catalog.
- Try a search with a different search phrase – show how if I type in "vaccine" and a space, it suggests "vaccine hesitancy". Take advantage of these suggested search terms as they are likely to be tagged in the resources.
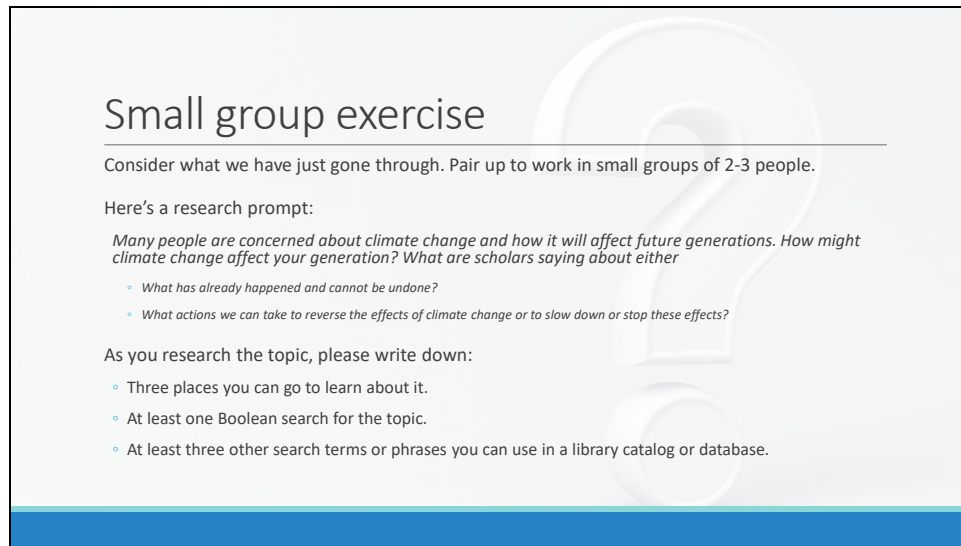- Open a resource to show that many abstracts also list keywords, which can suggest new search terms.

Ask for a sample topic from the group. Ask for suggestions to complete a similar process but as a group – where can I find information? What search terms should I use? (Use this discussion to elaborate on synonyms and different forms of a word, like vaccine and vaccination.) How can I limit or expand my search? How can I edit or revise the search to find related but different resources?

Work through the same process (background search, library catalog search, database search) to explore a new topic together.

Now it's your turn. Split into small groups and try to do these searches on your own. Where would you look? And how would you structure those searches?

Walk around the classroom to talk with groups individually about how they are looking for information. See where they are getting stuck. Are they applying what we have already discussed?

As time for the workshop draws to a close, discuss what they were asked to write down – where they looked, what search terms they used, and what they found. What was helpful in the search tips and demonstration when they were looking on their own for resources?

One last thing...

Always cite your sources! I put this lesson together inspired by the following article:

Mills, J., Wiley, C., & Williams, J. (2019). "This is what learning looks like!": Backward design and the Framework in first year writing. *Portal: Libraries and the Academy, 19*(1), 155-175. https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2019.0008

It's easier to write down your citations when you find your resources vs. going back to find them later after writing your paper. Using a software/website like RefWorks to keep track of resources can be an easy way to do this as your gather resources, but even putting them all in a Word doc or spreadsheet will give you one file that has everything saved for later.

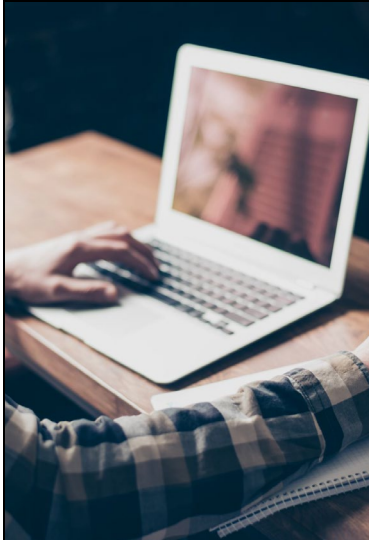Citations can feel difficult. Use online guides to help check your work.

We are here to help! You can make an appointment with me or another research librarian for a 30-minute consult to discuss your topic and research.

The writing center is also available for one-on-one consultations. These are also usually 30-minute consultations.

And finally, we do have drop-in help as well. SMU Libraries has partnered with the Writing Center to do 2 drop-in labs a week. Note the different locations – Tuesday labs are at the A-LEC (over by the stadium) and Wednesday labs are here at Fondren Library.

Good luck
with your research!

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This is my contact information. Please let me know if you'd like a copy of these slides and/or the handout with my notes and script. I'm happy to share them with you.