

# Finding Keywords

You have a research paper assignment and you have chosen a topic. You need to search the databases to locate articles on your topic. Before searching those databases you need to choose **keywords**.

Keywords are the **main words** that describe your topic.

Look at the following topics

“Should community colleges offer sports?”

Your keywords would include:

- Community college
- Sports

As you proceed with your research you might decide to add more keywords. If you wish to claim that students are more likely to enroll at a community college that offers sports you may wish to add the following terms to your searches:

- Recruitment
- Enrollment

Do not use the term “pros and cons.” Do not expect to find only articles that take one side or another. Articles are not indexed or marked as to which **position** the authors take. You have to read the articles in order to find out which position their authors take.

“How has rising college tuition impacted community college students?”

Your keywords would include

- Community college
- students
- Tuition

**NOTE:** Don’t use words like “impact” or “effects”

As you read you will discover new terms and phrases:

- Tuition increase
- Tuition hike
- College costs
- Graduation rates
- Retention

Take a moment and think about **other words** and **phrases** that describe your topic.

You should think of **synonyms**...

Examples:

- “sports” and “athletics”
- “capital punishment” and “death penalty”
- “guns” and “firearms”
- “teens” and “teenagers” and “adolescents”
- “cars” and “vehicles” and “motor vehicles” and “automobiles”

...And **broad terms**

- Facebook, MySpace and Twitter are examples of “online social networking” and “social media”

You may need to do some **background reading** to come up with terms. You may use your textbook or you could go ahead and get in the databases and perform what librarians call a “quick and dirty” search, using whatever words you already have in mind. Look for an article with a relevant-sounding title and click on the title. Look at the **subject terms** and the **abstract**. You may wish to skim the article itself.

Try doing a quick search on the **open web**, using Google. Don’t be afraid of Wikipedia at this point. Remember, you are just trying to come up with keywords so don’t worry about the types of resources you are allowed to use for your paper. You will use the words you find to search the resources you are permitted to use.

The library also has a limited number of **online** and **print encyclopedias** available for your use. Ask a librarian to help you find a useful encyclopedia.

## Words to Avoid

- **Conjunctions and prepositions** – examples include *and, or, through, of, about, under*. (**AND** and **OR** are special cases – they are used in **Boolean** searching)
- **Articles** - examples include *a, the*
- **Pronouns** – examples include *he, she, it, they, those, which*
- **Soft words** – examples include *issues, impact, effects, benefits*. *Relationship* is often cited as an example of a soft word but it can be useful in certain cases. Ask a librarian if you have questions.
- **Verbs** (usually) – there may be exceptions to this rule but notice that in the first topic example “should community colleges offer sports” we eliminated “offer” as a keyword. Again, ask a librarian if you have questions.

It is not enough to find keywords. You need to know how to enter them into the EBSCO search fields. For information on using and combining keywords see the instruction sheet called **Boolean and Phrase Searching in EBSCO**.