

Defining the Scope of a Research Question/ Narrowing & Broadening a Search Strategy

Purpose: Students often report either finding too much or too little information when searching library databases. Similarly they may also have difficulty determining a manageable topic and research question. The in-class activities described below can help students consider ways to narrow or broaden a research question in light of their search results.

Related resource: *Basic Search Tips* handout (especially page 2) (see libraries.iub.edu/teach/handouts)

Narrowing Activity

- Give students a broad topic like “cyberbullying” (or ask them to suggest a very broad topic). Have students do a quick keyword search on the topic in a library database like Onesearch@IU or Academic Search Premier. Ask students to study the information the database provides about their overall results and to consider if that information suggests about different, more specific directions the research might take. (e.g. What do subject headings or titles suggest about the topic?)
- After students have a few minutes to evaluate their results, discuss the results as a group. What information from the search results helped students identify potential approaches to focusing the topic? (Be sure to point out the role of subject headings or other salient pieces of metadata.)
- After considering the metadata provided by the search results, the class may consider additional ways to help narrow the topic. Question words like who, what, when, where, or how (WWWWH) may help individuals think about how to narrow the focus. (It may be worthwhile to emphasize how the metadata from the search results relate to WWWWH questions.)
 - Ex. Who? teens; How? social networking sites
- With the class create a narrower research question. Consider together if this research topic seems more feasible and why (not).
 - Ex. Do social networking sites act as a forum for cyberbullying among teens?
- Brainstorm with the class ways that the more focused question could be expressed in a database search. (Or have students do this in pairs or small groups.) Have students try this new search in the same library database.
- Discuss the new results and compare them with the previous search. Address the different search strategies people used to refine their searches. (e.g. additional keywords, subject terms, other field limiters)

Broadening Activity

- Give students a sample research question that is too narrow (or have someone suggest an overly narrow topic).
 - Ex. How does gun violence affect attrition rates among teens in rural high schools?
- Allow students time to search for this topic in a library database like OneSearch or Academic Search Premier. Ask them to record their search strategies and search results.
- Ask students to discuss their findings. What kinds of results did they get? What search strategies worked or didn't work? Eventually discuss why the research question is too narrow.
- Separate the question into key concepts. Identify elements of WWWWH (who, what, when, where, how) in the question. Brainstorm ways to broaden the topic.
 - Ex. What? gun violence. Could this be broadened to include other kinds of school violence? Where? rural high schools. Could this be broadened to all high schools or to all levels of education?
- Create a new broader research question from student responses.
 - Ex. How does school violence affect attrition rates in high school?
- Have students test this new search in the same library database. Have them record their search strategies.
- Discuss the new results and compare them with the previous search. Address the different search strategies people used to refine their searches. (e.g. additional keywords, subject terms, other field limiters)

Adapted from "Defining the Scope of a Research Question" in the IU Libraries Instruction Wiki, created by IU Libraries Instruction Assistants.