

## Using Subject Terms in Your Literature Searching

When you are doing original research, you are unlikely to find secondary literature that exactly matches your research topic. For your literature review, you are trying to find existing research that is related to your question in some key way. Before you begin searching, it's a good idea to think through what aspects of your research question might be covered in other research, and use a database's subject terms (called an index or thesaurus) to find that research. It's just as important to figure out what you are searching for as it is to know where to search.

1. Stating your research question:

Example: *Do charter schools create more equitable access to education for Philadelphia's low-income students?*

Your turn:

2. Break your research question down into major concepts.

Example: Charter schools  
Low income students  
Philadelphia  
Equitable access to education

Your turn:

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3. Using a database of your choice, search the thesaurus for subject terms connected to these concepts. They might be broader, narrower, or related.

Example, using ERIC:

Concept	Database subject terms		
Charter schools:	Charter schools	Non-traditional education	Institutional autonomy
Low income students:	Poverty	Economically disadvantaged	Low income groups
Philadelphia:	Urban areas	Urban education	Urban schools
Equitable access to education:	Access to education	Educational opportunities	Equal education

Your turn (using subject terms only):

	OR		OR	
_____		_____		_____
AND	OR		OR	
_____		_____		_____
AND	OR		OR	
_____		_____		_____
AND	OR		OR	
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