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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Database subject terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charter schools</td>
<td>Charter schools, Non-traditional education, Institutional autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low income students</td>
<td>Poverty, Economically disadvantaged, Low income groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philadelphia</td>
<td>Urban areas, Urban education, Urban schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equitable access to education</td>
<td>Access to education, Educational opportunities, Equal education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

   Your turn (using subject terms only):

   

   OR

   AND

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