

Developing a Research Vocabulary

What Words to Use?

Many times the most difficult part of searching for information on a research topic is identifying the best terminology to use in describing a topic. Each professional field has its own vocabulary. The terminology used to describe concepts in English Literature will differ from the terminology used to describe concepts in Psychology. While a search for psychological disorders represented in literature might involve the use of psychological terms, much of the terminology needed will be exclusive to literature.

For example, a common theme of investigation in literature is the concept of "madness in literature." Madness is only one possible way to describe what the researcher is looking for. There are all kinds of other terms that might be used as well, such as delusions, schizophrenia, insanity, mental illness, etc. What term works best in the quest for literature that features characters who are beset by madness can depend on the particular terminology used by the writers who are analyzing literature and the database being used to search for the literature. Herein lies one of the big problems that a researcher might encounter when trying to find relevant results in a research query: what terms are the best terms to use?

To further complicate matters, some topic investigations might involve looking at research in multiple related disciplines, each having its own particular vocabulary. For example, a topic dealing with homelessness and the connection between psychological disorders and homelessness and social services for the homeless will take a researcher into both the psychological and sociological literature. While the two fields might share a good bit of terminology, there might also be terminology peculiar to each field that is not shared. If a researcher were to explore a psychology database using terminology that was successful in a sociology database, the same level of success might not be guaranteed.

If the researcher is completely new to the area, for example, in the case where a professor assigns the research topic, he/she might have virtually no familiarity with what search terms might lead to meaningful results. So, the question becomes: what steps can be taken to get a sense of what is being published in the desired area?

Strategies

Brainstorm -- Sit down with a piece of paper and a pen or at a computer with a word processor launched and start jotting down every key concept that comes to mind in relation to the chosen or assigned topic. This can be done alone or with a group. For example, what words come to mind in the case of madness? Insanity? Mental Illness? Schizophrenia? Psychotic? Norman Bates? Ophelia? Crazy? Create a list of everything that comes to mind and see where it leads.

What words come to mind in the case of literature? Short stories? Poetry? Novels? Stories? Tales? Poe? Shakespeare? Jot down everything and then go back and scratch out what does not seem to fit and what does not appeal.

accept actual adapted
Aeschylus aesthetic
aggression Ajax Allen
Ginsberg ancient animals
Artaud Aschenbach Bacchae
Bedlam **Birth of Tragedy**
Carkesse chorus concept
conflict consciousness convey
Cowper creation Death in
Venice delusions depicts
describes Dionysiac **Dionysiac**
frenzy Dionysiac myth
Dionysus dramatic dream
emerges emotional Erinyes
Euripides experience expl
oration expression **fantasies**
feelings Freud function
Ginsberg Greek **guilt**
hallucinations Huckle
human imagination impulses
inner insanity instinctual
interpretation irrational
John Berryman **King Lear**
Lear Lear's Leverkusen
literary literature **madness**
manifestations Mann's means
mental mind moral mythical
nature ness Nietzsche
Nietzsche's **obsessive**
Odysseus Oresteia Orestes
Pentheus play poem poet
poetry primitive primordial
processes psychic
psychoanalytic psychological
rage rational reality
religious **repressed** reveals
rites ritual role says seems
sion Smart social society
soul sparagmos spleen
struggle suggests suicide
Sylvia Plath symbolic
symptoms theory
Thomas Mann tion **Tiresias**
trans transformation uncon
unconscious University Press
violence vision wild worship

What will be left after review is a list of possible terminology that might lead to the discovery of books, articles, and other materials of interest in the research project.

Browse a library catalog -- Try a search in a library catalog using whatever terminology first comes to mind or whatever key words and phrases result from brainstorming. Look at titles that come up in the results. Look at those that are appealing more closely. Read the full descriptions that are available in the catalog and look at the subject terms that are used in the catalog and the tables of content listed for the books. If available, use the Google book preview to see more about the books and to review key words and phrases that appear in the books.

Many library catalogs and databases now display so-called "facets" to the left or right of the results listing. Browse the facets for additional search ideas. For example, the UNF library catalog shows subject, author, geographic, and other facets to the left of the search results.

Browse an article database -- Most libraries will provide access to numerous article databases that provide means for searching through thousands or even millions of articles published in a variety of magazines, newspapers, and journals. Try searching a couple of databases with an eye toward discovering additional key words that might be useful in further refining a topic.

Look for search facets to discover additional terminology and related concepts. Most current databases show additional options for narrowing down a search or for doing an entirely new search.

Browse a subject thesaurus -- Before the advent of online databases, researchers would use subject thesauri to discover terminology that could be used to locate research on a particular topic. For example, the psychology index *Psychological Abstracts* was accompanied by the *Thesaurus of Psychological Index Terms* and the educational system ERIC had the *Thesaurus of ERIC Descriptors*. Both of these formerly print systems are available as online databases at this point as are their thesauri of descriptors (subject terms) and index terms.

Locate a book or article of interest -- Find a book or article that appears to focus on the topic of interest and scan the article summary (abstract) and the book table of contents and index for terminology that might lead to the discovery of additional relevant materials. Sometimes it is necessary to find only one good source to come up with numerous ideas for identifying additional materials.

Review book and article bibliographies -- Most academic publications, both books and articles, will include references to other sources of information related to the topics that they cover. Review the bibliographies with an eye toward discovering additional ideas for searching.

Consult an expert -- Meet with the professor for whom the research is being done. Arrange an appointment with a librarian to discuss strategies for finding additional materials.

The process of finding terminology that will aid in the discovery of relevant research materials can actually be an integral part of discovering a topic. Each of the strategies above can also be used as a means for zoning in on topics of interest and for narrowing down a topic that is still too broad. So the two processes -- choosing a research topic and discovering useful terminology -- work hand-in-hand.

Reading by Jim Alderman. Updated March 2014.