

Library Research for Geography and Environmental Studies Students

Tutorial 2: Thinking about information needs and choosing good keywords/subject terms

As you think about your topic, and decide on your research question, it's a good idea to be thinking about relevant keywords or subject terms to use in your literature search.

An article from the blog *The Thesis Whisperer* discusses the importance of this part of the process.

The blog is written by Dr. Inger Mewburn, the Director of Research Training at the Australian National University.

She says: "You have to be systematic about generating keywords – and creative at the same time. Not an easy ask. In fact, searching the literature involves a surprisingly sophisticated set of thought processes that take a long time to learn."

Her article details part of the process she used in one of her own research projects.

It's worth reading to see how she went through the process of generating specific questions out of her initial topic of interest.

I'll include a link to it in this course guide.

She started with the research question "To what extent do safety concerns affect women's transportation choices in large cities like Jakarta?"

She refined her question to three related sub-questions.

How do women make choices about commuting in other large cities?

How do women react to stories about violence in the media?

What makes women feel safe or unsafe in public places?

Later, she decided she needed to research and find information on the question "How do women make choices about commuting in other large cities?"

This question meant she needed to find information in three areas: commuting in large cities, commuting in small cities, and women and transportation.

Though it's not mentioned in the article, we can try to determine some keywords for a search.

The first step is to break your question down into relevant concepts.

In this case, we have four: women, commuting, cities, and choices.

The next step is to think of related terms, which I've added next to the initial terms.

For example, some related terms for women are female or girl, and for commuting are transportation or travel.

It's important to determine as many as you can to ensure your search results are comprehensive and relevant.

Here's an example to illustrate.

This is a recent review article from the journal *Landscape and Urban Planning*.

The researchers detailed their search strategy in a table.

They outlined three keyword categories they were searching for, and then listed all the keywords they thought were important for their searches.

They linked them together into long search strings using database operators.

They then replicated each search across 6 different scholarly research databases.

We'll discuss this in a later video.

Please continue to the next video in the series.