

Getting precise results: narrowing your search

Ever find yourself with this problem? You're starting on a research project; let's say the question "how do drugs affect your body?"

You go to your favourite search engine, and type in the question, and the result is thousands, or even millions of hits.

But you don't want lots of results. You want results that relevant to your topic, and precise.

In the following presentation we'll look at 4 techniques to really narrow your search results to appropriate, scholarly sources for your research project.

Four ways to narrow a search and get precise results:

1. Use a research database
2. Use specific words or concepts in your search instead of questions
3. Narrow results to only peer-reviewed articles
4. Narrow results using database subject headings

Suggestion 1: Use a research database to narrow results to only scholarly materials.

Research databases can be found in the [Subject Guides](#) section of the Library website.

You can select a subject guide according to a specific discipline.

If you're not sure, select "Interdisciplinary" for a range of databases to choose from.

Using the PsycInfo database as an example, we'll type in our question "How do drugs affect your body?"

We retrieve very few results. (1 result)

How can we find more articles on our topic?

Suggestion 2: Instead of typing in a question, use specific words or ideas in your search for better results

In this example, we could search for a specific drug, caffeine.

Now we have lots of results. (5,389 results)

This is more manageable than what we find with a broad search over the web, but still too many to read through in any detail.

How can we narrow our results further?

Suggestion 3: narrow results to only "peer-reviewed" or scholarly articles

You can do this in many databases when you begin your search by checking the "Peer reviewed" box. (a visual example is shown)

You can also refine your results after your search to "peer reviewed" and "scholarly journals". (you do this using the limiters on the left side of the ProQuest search results page)

NOTE: Some databases, like Web of Science, don't use the "peer reviewed" check box.

That's because the content found there is considered "scholarly."

Make sure you select "Articles" in the "Document Types" area (in Web of Science), in this case to limit results to research articles.

Back to our PsycInfo search. We're still retrieving a lot of results.

How can we narrow down to a smaller, very relevant set of articles?

Suggestion 4: Narrow your results using subject terms

Many databases have specialized subject headings assigned to articles to make them easier to find and retrieve.

You can often access an article's subject headings by looking at the Abstract section.

Looking at subject headings can also give us **additional terms** we can use to further narrow our results.

In this case, you might decide to include the subject heading "emotional states" to your search and narrow down on that as an exact subject heading.

We now have narrowed our results down to 154 peer-reviewed articles.

Instead of the broad question "how do drugs affect your body?" we've also narrowed down to the more precise topic of the effect of caffeine on emotional states.

If you have any questions, ask us at <https://library.wlu.ca/help/askus>