Developing a Search Strategy: The First Step to Research Success

1. Write your research topic as a statement or question:
Example: How is the rising cost of college education impacting the U.S. economy?

____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________

2. Identify main concepts (1-3). Cross out irrelevant words in your topic statement above.
Example: How is the rising cost of college education impacting the U.S. economy?
In this example, there are three main concepts: cost, college and economy? These words are pretty vague and might not give us the best results. Let’s brainstorm other search words.

3. Think of synonyms for each key concept (i.e., words that might actually “live” in your articles):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Concept</th>
<th>Synonym 1</th>
<th>Synonym 2</th>
<th>Synonym 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>Tuition</td>
<td>“Student Debt”</td>
<td>“Financial Aid”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College</td>
<td>“Higher Education”</td>
<td>“Community College”</td>
<td>“Public University”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>Homeownership</td>
<td>“Social Mobility”</td>
<td>Employment</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Now try it with your topic:

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4. Create a Search Strategy. Connect your concepts with AND, OR, NOT and quotation marks [“ “].

Use **AND** to **connect concepts**. AND finds both terms, so a search for “student debt” AND homeownership provides articles that talk about both.

Use **OR** to look for **synonyms**. OR looks for either term, so a search for “student debt” OR “Student loans” finds articles that use either term but not necessarily both.

Use **quotation marks [“ “]** to search for **phrases**. A search for higher education will automatically look for the terms higher and education, but they may appear in completely different parts of the article. For example, you might find an article titled “Kindergarten Education: Achieving Higher Standards”. Instead, use quotation marks to lock the words together as a phrase.

Use an **asterisk [*]** for **truncation**. For example, use homeowner* to search for homeowner, homeowners OR homeownership.

You may have to try several searches to see what works best for your topic.

Example 1: “student debt” AND homeownership
Example 2: “higher education” AND “middle class”
Example 3: college AND (employment OR unemployment)

Now, form a few search strategies for your own topic:

1. _______________________________________________________________________________
2. _______________________________________________________________________________
3. _______________________________________________________________________________