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When scholars at any level are doing research, one step they usually take is searching for sources in library databases. A library database is like a container for the scholarly conversation. The articles that researchers publish are collected in databases, and assigned terms to describe what they're about. You can think of these as "expert terms."

There's not just one database that houses the entire conversation. The library has many databases, and a lot of them are specific to different fields of study, so researchers will choose a database to search based on their subject area. In this video, you'll learn search strategies that you can apply across library databases.

Let's take a look at how one database works, by helping Alan with his English 110 assignment. For his research paper, Alan wants to explore how social media influences political participation. He searched for his topic in the database, but he barely got any results and they don't look relevant. This is because he needs to be more strategic about the keywords he uses in his search. Databases will give you results when your keywords match some of: the words in the title, the expert terms used to describe the articles, or the words in the abstract. When you're first starting out with research, it's difficult to know what those terms will be-- but there are two strategies

Alan can use to do a more effective search. Strategy 1 is to develop a list of keywords to describe the topic and search for them in a variety of combinations. Thinking through synonyms for terms, as well as specific issues within your topic, can help you find the most relevant articles. In most databases, it helps to put multi-word phrases in quotation marks, and connect your terms using AND. If Alan wanted to focus on how younger voters use social media to participate in political discussions, he could try searching: "Young adults" and "elections" and "social media," OR he could try Youth and Politics and Twitter.

Even when you've developed strategic combinations of keywords that address the issues you want to investigate, you will still need to refine your terms, broadening or narrowing based on the results you get. For example, when Alan tried the keyword combination "young adults" and "elections" and "social media," he got very few results. Some of these might be useful, but changing "social media" to the broader term "internet" gets him more results that are still relevant to the issue of how younger voters participate in political discussions using digital technology.

There's a second strategy you can try once you've experimented with keywords. Choose an article that looks somewhat relevant to your topic and locate the list of expert terms used to describe it. "Political Communication" and "young adults - political activity" will both be useful for this topic. Alan can add a term to his keyword combination, or he can click on a term and get a new list of articles. Alan is off to a great start, since he's tried multiple searches using his own keywords and expert terms, but he's not done yet! Academic researchers usually try multiple databases to get the most relevant information.

In the last section, you'll learn some strategies for choosing the best search tools for your topic and accessing the sources you find.