Choosing good keywords

1. Introduction

Many of us search for the information we need by choosing a couple of obvious terms to put into a search engine, like Google. We may try different terms if we cannot immediately find what we are looking for.

If you need information for a specific purpose, such as an assignment or report, unpicking the question can help you to identify the best keywords to get you what you need more effectively.

Learning outcome

By the end of this activity, you will be able to identify keywords that are specific to your requirements, to search for information online.

2. Specialised words and subject terms

When you select search terms, these should reflect the purpose of your search. Consider the reason you are searching for information. Is it for:

- Personal interest?
- Finding out about local issues?
- Work-based information?
- An assignment?
- Something else?

Identifying why you are searching for information will influence how you find information and help determine the keywords you use.

3. Selecting keywords according to purpose of search

Think about how appropriate these keywords might be for the purpose of each of the following three searches:

Purpose of search, part 1

Journalist working for local news looking for information to report on youth crime rates.

Keyword choice:

1. global, crime, statistics
2. youth crime, prevention, education
3. youth crime, local, statistics

Feedback option 1

global, crime, statistics

Your answer is incorrect, as it's unlikely that a local reporter would require international statistics.

Feedback option 2

youth crime, prevention, education

Your answer is incorrect, as this might be more suited to someone looking into how to reduce youth crime.

Feedback option 3

youth crime, local, statistics

Your answer is correct, as this search specifically focuses on the required demographic of local youths.

Purpose of search, part 2

A student assignment on carbon dioxide.

Keyword choice:

1. carbon footprint, reduce, home
2. CO2 levels, ice core, proxy
3. carbon emissions, reduce, local action

Feedback option 1

carbon footprint, reduce, home

Your answer is incorrect, as this might be better suited for personal interest to reduce your own carbon footprint.

Feedback option 2

CO2 levels, ice core, proxy

Your answer is correct, as these are specific terms that might be more recognisable to someone studying the subject.

Feedback option 3

carbon emissions, reduce, local action

Your answer is incorrect, as this search will help someone find out about local initiatives to reduce carbon emissions.

Purpose of search, part 3

Parent looking for a list of recommended vaccinations for child.

Keyword choice:

1. required vaccines, child, NHS
2. Hepatitis B, vaccine, globulin, transmission
3. child, vaccination, statistics

Feedback option 1

required vaccines, child, NHS

Your answer is correct, as if a parent were looking on behalf of their child, they might consider looking for information from the UK National Health Service.

Feedback option 2

Hepatitis B, vaccine, globulin, transmission

Your answer is incorrect, as this search contains highly specialised search terms that may be more familiar to practitioners than the general public.

Feedback option 3

child, vaccination, statistics

Your answer is incorrect, as this type of search is more suited to the purpose of finding data on the number of children vaccinated, rather than for finding a list of required vaccines.

3. Using keywords for a student assignment

In the previous activity, each of the searches included only a few terms. In the example of the student, the keywords used for the assignment were more specialist. This will result in fewer, more focused results.

The question that the student was answering might be something like this:
"How can proxy data be collected to show CO_2 levels in ancient atmospheres? Give a detailed example, and describe the effects of such data on our understanding of changing concentrations of CO_2."

Here the student would need to think about improving search results by using specialist terminology from their studies.

4. Refining your search

Even with carefully chosen keywords, you may still be getting too many search hits.

You can refine your search by using the advanced features of your search engine, or database.

For example, in Google you can exclude terms by placing a dash (-) before them. Think of it as a minus.

If you were searching for a supplier of chippings to make a child's play area safe, you wouldn't necessarily require any results talking about dogs.

So your search terms might look like this:
bark play -dog (screen reader users: bark play -(dash) dog)

Question

What search terms would you use to search for second-hand or used violins in Warwickshire? Include at least one term you want to exclude from the search, using the dash.

Feedback

We searched for: violin sale Warwickshire -new

(screen reader users: violin sale Warwickshire -(dash) new)

5. Summary

Tips to improve your search

- Plan your search by thinking about what you are really looking for, and decide which keywords best describe your topic.
- Look back through any background material to find relevant keywords you may have forgotten.
- If you get too many results, try adding more keywords to your search. This will make it more specific.
- If you find too few relevant results, try removing one or two words to make your search broader.
- Set a time limit, and stop if you have not found anything.
- Set a search to exclude certain terms in the result, or use other advanced features to refine the hits you get.

Next Steps

Try a Google advanced search for your keywords..

Spend a few minutes looking at the other search options in Google, and choose one or two to try for yourself.