

# Researching Step by Step

Mills Research Help Desk, 2nd floor • [library@mcmaster.ca](mailto:library@mcmaster.ca) • 525-9140 x22533 • <http://library.mcmaster.ca>

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Student ID#: \_\_\_\_\_

## Part One: Creating a Search Strategy

*...because Google-type searches don't tend to work in article databases!*

1. Write down your topic here, in the form of a statement or question (example: *Discuss some of the issues surrounding food in developing nations.*)

---

2. Break down your topic into a list of major concepts and keywords and list them here (examples: *food, developing nations*):

---

3. Truncate your keywords as appropriate, using an asterisk \* to capture plurals and different endings, and list them here (example: use *developing nation\** to retrieve *developing nation* and *developing nations*):

---

---

4. List here any synonyms or word variations you can think of for your keywords (e.g. synonyms for *developing nations* could be: *third world, developing countries*):

---

---

5. Using the elements from 1-4 above, create 1 or 2 search statements and write them below (example: *food and (developing nation\* or third world or developing countr\*)*)

---

# Part Two: Finding Articles on your Topic using e-Article Databases

## 1. Identifying an appropriate number of relevant articles

a. **Go fishing:** try your search statement in the Basic Search of *Sociological Abstracts*. For the search with the best results...

- How many items did you get? \_\_\_\_\_
- How many of these are **journal articles** (look at the tabs above your search results)? \_\_\_\_\_
- How many are from **peer-reviewed** journals? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do the articles look like they're on topic at this point?

Absolutely       Yes, kind of       No, not really       Don't know

## b. Focus your results to be more on-topic

i. **see if you can find one or two good articles;** if you have a very large result set (100 or more) you might find it easier to find on-topic articles by using **Advanced Search** to search for your words in the **article titles only** ("Title, TI =" in the dropdown menu). When you find some on-topic articles, **view the full records and look at the Descriptors.**

ii. **list any Descriptors you found that are relevant to your topic** (examples: *Food, Developing Countries, Food Security*):

---

iii. **Descriptor Searching:** try a **new search** using the Descriptors you found

(1) **find an article that has all the descriptors** you want, view the full record, **tick off the descriptors you want, and use AND to narrow**

(2) alternatively, use the **Advanced Search** screen and search for your descriptor words; be sure to **choose "Descriptors, DE =" from the drop-down menu.** You may have to use a combination of descriptor words and words in the title or words anywhere, depending on which concepts in your search have Descriptor equivalents.

(3) Keep checking the descriptors of good articles and try new searches & new combinations if you see any that look interesting.

Do the articles look like they're on topic at this point?

Absolutely       Yes, kind of       No, not really       Don't know

**c. Getting an appropriate number of on-topic results (between 15 and 50 or so)**

**i. Too many articles? Try one or more of these strategies:**


- narrow down to **just journal articles**, or **just peer-reviewed journal articles**
- add **more keywords** combined with “and” to narrow your topic
- narrow your **date range**
- **limit**, for example: journal articles and/or English only (Advanced Search)


**ii. Not enough articles? Try one or more of these strategies**

- expand your **date range**
- use **fewer words** combined with “and”
- use **more synonyms** combined with “or” and parentheses
- use **broader**, more general words

When you get a list of **between 15 and 50 or so journal articles**, go on to the next part. **If you're still having trouble getting on-topic results at this point, please ask for help** (the librarian giving the workshop, or afterwards at the Research Help desk – some searches are harder than others!).

## **Part Three: Finding out if the library owns access to the articles**


1. Pick **5-10 interesting-looking articles**; make sure that when you look at the full view and read the abstract and descriptors they still look good for your topic.
2. Click the  button for each article and check to see if there's access to the full text of the article **online** or **on the shelf**.

Note: If the  button isn't there, or doesn't work, **search MORRIS manually, by Journal Title**.

Find:

- one** article that's available **online**
- one** that's available at McMaster **on the shelf**

**3. Check if the journal is academic (scholarly) or peer reviewed (refereed)**

a. in the  window, at the bottom, click on **ulrichsweb.com**

b. for each journal, record the following information (if given):

1. Journal Title: \_\_\_\_\_ Document Type \_\_\_\_\_ Refereed?  Yes  No

2. Journal Title: \_\_\_\_\_ Document Type \_\_\_\_\_ Refereed?  Yes  No

#### 4. Documenting what you found, and getting the full text online or on the shelf

- a. **Mark** both articles and **email the article references to yourself**.
  
- b. **For the article that's available online**, go to the online full text version of the article, and write the first sentence of the article here:

---

---

- c. **For the article that's available on the shelf**, write down the following information:

*Article info (from Sociological Abstracts):*

<b>Author(s):</b> _____
<b>Title:</b> _____
<b>Journal name (Source):</b> _____
<b>Volume:</b> _____ <b>Issue (if any) :</b> _____ <b>Date:</b> _____ <b>Pages:</b> _____

*Library info (from MORRIS):*

<b>Library:</b> _____ <b>Collection (location within the library):</b> _____
<b>Call number:</b> _____
<b>We have:</b> (which volumes do we own?): _____

**Congratulations! You're done!**

**Thanks for coming!**

...and remember that the Research Help Desk is here to help you  
and we know **MANY WONDERFUL RESEARCH SECRETS**  
so save your time and come *see us before* the frustration starts!