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Assignment Research Steps

Before you start your research for an assignment, read the instructions and the assignment marking criteria in detail.

UQ's Student Services has produced a range of resources to help you understand different types of assignments and give you tips for structuring your work:

- [Types of assignments](#)
- [Steps for successful assignments](#)
- [Online Assignment Planner](#) to help plan your assessments

What type of information to use

Where to start? The following will help you understand different types of information sources and their suitability for assignments:

Types of information sources - The source you use will differ based on the questions you are trying to answer and the assignment requirements. Examples of different types are books, journals, newspapers, statistics, internet and specialist information such as company information and legal information.

The Library has produced the guide [Search by type of information](#) to help you find specialised information.

Background information

[Library Guides](#) are a good starting point for information on your topic. Library guides list subject-specific dictionaries, encyclopaedias, books, ebooks, websites and more, providing useful background information to get you underway.

Develop a Search Strategy

Now that you have worked out the type of assignment and type of information you need, it is time to develop your search strategy. The more thought you put into the strategy and the more systematic you are, the more relevant your results will be. A good way of [planning your search](#) strategy is to use these five standard steps known as **SKILL**:

- **S**ummarise your topic **in one or two sentences**
- **K**eywords and phrases need to be identified
- **I**dentify synonyms / alternative terms and variant spelling
- **L**ink your keywords and phrases to develop your search strategy
- **L**ocate and evaluate your results. Revise your search if necessary

You might find it useful to use this [Search Strategy Planner sheet](#) to develop your search strategy. It will help you to be systematic about the steps in the process so that you end up with an effective strategy that can be used with a range of search tools – UQ Library Search, general and specialist databases, as well as Google and Google Scholar.

STEP 1: Summarise your topic.

To test your understanding of the topic, summarise it in your own words:

- read your assignment topic or question carefully
- reflect on the aim of the assignment while thinking about the tasks involved
- summarise the topic in your own words, being careful to include all of the main concepts.

Consider a specific assignment topic:

The use of social networking has become a part of educational practice in Australian universities. What are the major issues surrounding the use of social networking in tertiary education in this country?

Questions to consider:

- What are the **main concepts** of the topic?
- What **specific ideas** are you trying to describe or prove?
- What **coverage** are you interested in: international or a specific geographical region?
- What **timespan** do you need to cover? You may not always be given this information.

You could summarise this topic as follows:

Discuss the use of social networking in universities in Australia.

STEP 2: Identify the main keywords or phrases

Using the earlier example above, you might highlight the following words. We call them our keywords.

Discuss the use of social networking in universities in Australia.

Visit the UQ Student Services webpage on [Topic Analysis](#) for more information on this process.

STEP 3: Identify synonyms / alternative terms and variants of spelling

When writing about a topic, not all authors will use exactly the same words. For instance, in our example, *social networking* could also be *Facebook*. This means that you will need to think about possible synonyms (words that mean the same thing), more general or more specific words, or perhaps words spelt differently. English and American spelling variations are common. Treat it as a brainstorming exercise. The words you come up with will become "terms" in our search strategy.

If you are having trouble thinking of some alternative words, it can sometimes help to use a **thesaurus** or a **dictionary**. Visit your [Library Guides](#) to find a subject-specific one.

 **ACTIVITY:** Using the [Search Strategy Planner](#) write the example topic into the large oval in Step 1.

Take the keywords we identified in Step 2 and write these into the smaller ovals in Step 2 of your planner sheet - one keyword in each.


Now in Step 3 on your planner sheet, begin to brainstorm your keywords into a range of alternative words. What are some words or phrases that mean the same thing or describe the same idea? Write these in the rectangular boxes in the planner. Remember to keep the keywords - *social networking*, *universities*, *Australia* - in their appropriate box.

Try it in your Search Strategy Planner.

STEP 4: Link your keywords and phrases with AND & OR to develop your search strategy

This is an important part of the search strategy process. Linking your keywords/terms with the connectors AND & OR enables you to cover all aspects of your topic. **AND & OR** are sometimes referred to as Boolean operators, a mathematical term.

Linking Search terms with Boolean Operators			
Boolean Operator	What does it do?	Example	Effect
AND	Connects keywords and also connects groups of synonyms/alternative keywords	<i>facebook AND university</i> <i>(facebook OR twitter) AND (university OR universities)</i>	Every result will contain both words. Every result will contain at least one word from the first set of brackets and at least one word from the second set of brackets.
OR	Connects synonyms or alternative keywords. Use brackets to group them together so that the search tool treats them as a group	<i>(facebook OR twitter OR instagram)</i>	Your search tool will look for instances of either of these words occurring in a document.

 **ACTIVITY:** Complete Step 4 in your Search Strategy Planner.

- Remember your keywords in the rectangular boxes are alternatives to each other and should be connected with OR and bracketed together.
- The lines represent the AND connector.
- Try it in your Search Strategy Planner. If you are unsure, [here is an example](#) to understand the process.

Some additional tips to make your search strategy more effective:

- Truncation (Alternative words endings)**

Using Truncation			
Symbol	What does it do?	Example	Effect
Usually an Asterisk *	The symbol replaces a letter or group of letters. The asterisk is placed at the end of the stem word.	<i>Universit*</i> Tip: check your search tool for the truncation symbol – not all use*	The * stands for a y in the case of university or ies in the case of universities. This is the same as typing <i>(university OR universitites)</i>
Question Mark ?	This symbol replaces a single letter within the word or at the end of a word.	<i>Wom?n</i> <i>Organi?ation</i> <i>Cat?</i>	Will find: <i>Woman, Women</i> <i>Organisation, Organization</i> <i>Cat, Cats</i>

- Phrases

Phrases			
Symbol	What does it do?	Example	Effect
"inverted commas" for phrase searching	Specifies that the words must occur in the order listed	<i>"social networking"</i>	In every result, the word <i>social</i> , will be immediately followed by the word, <i>networking</i> . This is useful for searching for words that commonly occur together.

Before you begin using any search tool, always check out the "Help" section so that you know exactly how the tool works. This will include information about the Boolean operators AND & OR, truncation, phrase searching and variant spelling.

STEP 5. Locate and evaluate your results. Revise your search if necessary.

Evaluate your results list in terms of quantity and quality. You might need to revise your search strategy.

★ **TIP:** If you have **too many** results, you may want to:

- add additional keywords or phrases
- limit your search results by document type, date, subject (most search tools have this feature)
- conduct your search in a particular field (e.g. abstract or title)

★ **TIP:** If you have **too few** results, you may want to:

- check your spelling
- remove some of the keywords
- try alternative keywords and phrases
- try alternative search tools (use the [Library Guides](#) to find these).

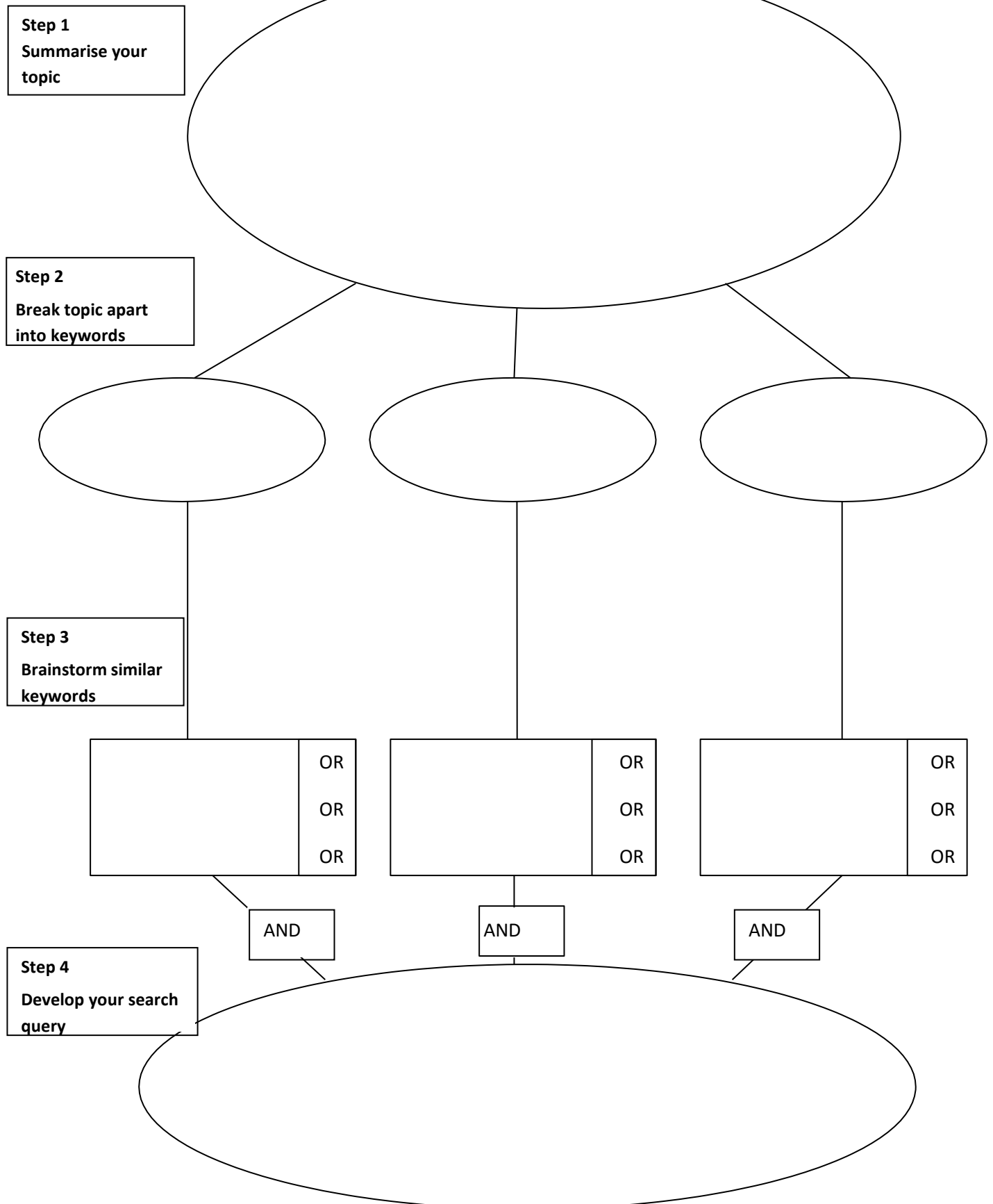
Evaluate the quality of what you find. Learning how to determine the relevance and quality of a text is one of the most important skills in research.

★ **TIP:** If you need to find information published, for instance, in the last two years you can deal with timeframes by using limiting. Check the Help section of your search tool for more information on limiting.

★ **TIP:** If you are still unsure of how to create a search strategy, you can refer to the [Library Guide](#).



Search Strategy Planner



Completed Search Strategy Planner Example

