Doing an advanced searching using the PsycINFO thesaurus

Abstract
The PsycINFO®, database, American Psychological Association’s (APA) renowned resource for abstracts of scholarly journal articles, book chapters, books, and dissertations, is the largest resource devoted to peer-reviewed literature in behavioral science and mental health. It contains over 3 million records. Students studying at level 6 and above and researchers are advised to use this database directly rather than using Library Plus as you will be able to perform more in-depth searches of the available material.

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Introduction
PsycINFO is one of the databases that you will find useful for conducting research in the field of mental health and behavioural sciences. It is one of many resources searched by the aggregate resource Library Plus so when you’re just starting out Library Plus is a good place to start. Once you progress in your studies beyond level 5 undergraduate, or if you are a postgraduate student or researcher, then it is better practice to search all of the databases that are useful / relevant to your research topic individually.

In the case of PsycINFO this is because there are some features unique to the database that can only be used when you are in the individual resource itself, and some of these features will be covered here.

Before you start searching
The Plan
Before you start searching you will need to plan out what terms you’re going to look for. Initially they will come from your research topic/ assignment title but you should also try to think of whether there is any other way of expressing a concept using a different word or phrase.

For example, if you were doing a search on refugees you should also look for asylum seeking / asylum seeker or displaced and so on. It is possible that there is only one way to express a particular concept, but most of the time there are multiple terms or phrases that may have been used by different authors when writing their articles so you will need to think of—and search for—as many of those terms as possible in order to reduce the risk of missing out on articles that may be relevant to your research topic.

Subject Heading Searches
Some databases—like PsycINFO—don’t just allow you to search for your keywords or phrases in the abstract or title of an article, they’ll also let you browse through a database-specific list of subject terms that are tailored to the needs of the disciplines covered by that database.
It is important to be aware that you cannot just search in the subject headings index (aka thesaurus) as, on its own, it is too limiting and you will miss relevant articles. However, if you do a subject heading search and then follow that up with an abstract/article title search then you will get a decent breadth of coverage of the material that matches your search terms.

Not all databases have one of these searchable indexes but PsycINFO is one that does.

It is also important to note that, although the content of the database is international, the company that produces the database is US in origin and for that reason the subject headings are derived from the American Psychological Association (APA) subjects. This means that there may be some terminology differences that you will have to take into account when searching.

For example, if you were looking for articles referring to carers—this is the term that is generally used in the UK to describe this particular population—you could search for it in the abstract or title of an article; but, if you were also doing a subject heading search in the thesaurus of the database, you would have to look for caregivers because that’s the PsycINFO heading used to describe that group of people.

It may seem a bit over the top but the more you use the database(s) that have these specific thesauri that you can search/browse, the more familiar you’ll become with which terms are shared internationally and which terms may be slightly (or very) different depending on the country the research is coming from/where the database originates.

Process
You can map out your search strategy in whichever way works best for you but you should note down all of the terms that you’re going to look for, grouping them together by concept.

What this means is that if, for example, you were going to do a search for articles looking at:
you would list all of the variant terms you could search for that were related to each individual concept, bearing in mind any unique search options the database you’re using may have.¹

You can do this in list form, using a grid box, or if you are a more visual learner and spider diagrams or mind mapping diagrams/trees work best for you, you can use one of those.

The example below uses the grid box method and each **column** contains the search terms for **one** search.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEARCH ONE</th>
<th>SEARCH TWO</th>
<th>SEARCH THREE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Refugees</td>
<td>Posttraumatic stress disorder</td>
<td>Health professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OR</td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asylum seeker</td>
<td>Complex PTSD</td>
<td>Nurses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OR</td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asylum seeking</td>
<td>DESNOS</td>
<td>Occupational therapists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OR</td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Displaced</td>
<td>Post-traumatic stress</td>
<td>Counselors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OR</td>
<td>OR</td>
<td>OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PTSD</td>
<td>Counsellors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1: Concept table**

It is not good practice to look for all of your search terms, for all of your different concepts, in one go as you run the risk of confusing the database as to how you want your search to be done; it’s also more complicated to look in multiple locations

¹ Some databases won’t require you to search for age groups narratively i.e. searching for ‘older people’/aged/elderly etc. but will provide you with a selection of age ranges that you can choose from by ticking the relevant box in a sidebar or ‘Search Options’ section instead
(subject, abstract, title) for your terms, and you may find that you waste a lot of time correcting and re-doing your search.

Looking for each concept as a completely separate search and then combining them together to see what articles they have in common is much better practice, and also gives you the opportunity to do lots of different combinations if your first search isn’t very successful.

All of the search terms in the grid box above will be looked for in the abstract and article title. When it comes to looking for them in the subject heading index however, you may not be able to look for them all as some of them may not be ‘official’ subject headings for that database and on the next few pages there will be a run-through of looking for the concepts that are set out in the grid box and how and what and where to look for those terms in PsycINFO.

**Issues with signing in to a personal EBSCO account – a workaround from the Library**

There have been issues with EBSCO databases giving users an error message, or a browser giving an ‘unsafe page’ message when users click on the ‘Sign In’ link to access or create their personal accounts in any of the databases that are provided by EBSCO.

There is a workaround which should let you create / log in to a personal EBSCO account (for Library Plus/ CINAHL Complete/ Medline/ AMED/ PsycINFO etc.)

It’s quite long-winded but it does work. If you did want to give it a go:

Click on this link: [Link to EBSCO resources using alternate authentication route](#)

And it will take you to a page that has a box with the text, ‘Select your region or group’ in it --> from the drop-down list select UK Higher Education
It will go to a new page listing UK universities --> look for **University of Derby** and click on it

- Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance
- UCL (University College London)
- UniServeCy CAVLE
- University College School
- University of Aberdeen
- University of Bath
- University of Bedfordshire
- University of Birmingham
- University of Bolton - Legacy - Do not use
- University of Bradford
- University of Brighton
- University of Bristol
- University of Buckingham
- University of Cambridge
- University of Central Lancashire
- University of Chester
- University of Chichester
- University of Cumbria
  - **University of Derby**
- University of Dundee
- University of Durham
- University of East Anglia (UEA)
- University of Edinburgh
- University of Essex
You will be presented with the Udo login page --> put your university credentials in

Once you’re logged in via the University it will give you a selection of EBSCO databases to choose from; CINAHL is available under the long link at the top of the page, PsycINFO is further down the page.
Click on the link that will take you to the resource you want to use.

Whichever database you select, you should see the normal search screen but now, if you click on the **Sign In** link in the grey banner, it shouldn’t give you an error or unsafe page message and you can log in with your personal EBSCO credentials (or create an account if you haven’t done so already.)

If you continue to have problems accessing or creating a personal EBSCO account please email **library@derby.ac.uk** with full details and we’ll investigate further.

**NB:** PsycINFO is an EBSCOhost database (like Library Plus/ Medline/ CINAHL Complete / AMED etc.) which means that if you created a personal account for
Library Plus then the same username and password will work on any other EBSCOhost database. If you haven’t created a personal account for one of these databases then you should do that now.

Create a personal account
Having a personal account is a good idea as it means you’ll be able to add articles/records you want to keep to a folder and they won’t then be deleted when you exit the database.

In the banner at the top of the screen click on the link **Sign In**

![Sign In](Sign%20In.png)

**Figure 2: Sign in link for EBSCO databases**
You will be presented with a username/password box – your UDo login **won’t** work here so click on the link to **Create a New Account** and follow the instructions on screen.

Once your account has been created, and you’ve logged in, click on the **Folder** link in the banner at the top of the screen.

![Folder](Folder.png)

**Figure 3: Personal folder link for EBSCO databases**

This will take you to your in-database file storage area. You have two sections to the sidebar on the left: a generic section at the top which everyone gets and cannot change; and a custom section at the bottom which is empty apart from a button that will allow you to create folders.

In the My Custom section, click on **New** and create a folder that you’ve called **Articles** (or Yes or Maybe)
Figure 4: Create new custom folder & personal sidebar

When you’ve done this, click on the small *Back* link towards the top left of the page.

Figure 5: Back link in an EBSCO database

This should return you to the advanced search screen and the next—rather large—image gives you a snapshot of the top section of the advanced search screen.

As the image takes up a whole page, to make it clearer you will find it on the next page.
Use the Thesaurus to look for specific subject headings and their related terms — this allows you to be more precise but should never be used in isolation as it is VERY narrow. Always use in conjunction with e.g. AB Abstract and/or TI Title.

The most common search options are TX All Text (searches entire record and any available full-text), TI Title (article title), AB Abstract.

MA MeSH Subject Heading (Medical Subject Heading) is a descriptor used by the US National Library of Medicine to classify articles by broad or narrow topics.

SU Subjects/DE Subjects [exact] / MA Word in Major Subject Heading are all from the Thesaurus in PsycINFO.

In both instances above, you will need to know in advance what the correct subject term is. If you search the thesaurus however, you can browse and get suggestions from the database.

There are a lot of options to narrow your search down on the Advanced Search page — by language, date, full text, first printing, final printing, peer reviewed, qualitative/quantitative studies, clinical trials, age group and gender of clients among many.

You will be able to select these options on the results page as well so you don’t have to choose anything right away.

Figure 6: Top of PsycINFO’s advanced search screen
The Search

1: Looking for subject headings

Because of the way your results are displayed on both the results page and in your search history, if you decide to look for the database’s own subject headings as well as your keywords in the abstract / title of the article then there is a ‘best’ order in which to conduct your search to make it flow well.

Look for the subject headings first by clicking on the Thesaurus tab in the banner at the top of the page.

This will take you to the Browsing: PsycINFO page with two search boxes on it (the presence of two boxes on this page is one of the main visual differences between PsycINFO and some of the other EBSCO databases like Medline and CINAHL Complete).
In the second box on the page type in one of the terms from your first list of concept variations to see if it exists in the database's thesaurus as an 'official' APA term.

So, using the example in 'The Plan' section of this document, you might type in **refugees** and click on the **Browse** button.

Hopefully, if your term is in the thesaurus it will be at or near the top of the list that is then displayed.

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**REMEMBER!**

You won’t always find the terms you type into the browse box – that doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t search for them later in the main part of the advanced search screen, looking in the abstract / title of the article.

Some terms used in the UK aren’t part of the APA’s thesaurus – but we have to check, because if they *are* there, we want to select them to reduce the risk of missing relevant material.

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Figure 8: Browse page with subject term and result
To look for an additional, related, term (and it must be related, or interchangeable, with your previous term) just delete the term *refugees* from the search box, type in *asylum seekers* and click on search.

For this part of the search, although it wasn’t successful, PsycINFO does give information on what is the preferred term that should be used.
Once you’ve added all the related terms you want to look for to the search box, click on the search button.

![Search box with terms added](image1.png)

Figure 11: Add additional - related - terms to search box

You should now see your results page with a partial view of how many records are in PsycINFO containing your terms as subject headings.

![Partial results](image2.png)

Figure 12: Partial results for search one

Now we’ve done the first half of our first search we need to add the next set of terms to ensure we’ve covered as many potential articles as possible.

2: Adding in the abstract / title searches for the same concept

Because searching in the Thesaurus is a very narrow type of search to do, in order to cover all bases and ensure greater breadth of coverage, you will also need to repeat your search in the main search screen.

If you’ve already performed a Thesaurus search this is very easy to do as your subject search terms are already in the first search box on the advanced search
screen (the database will always put the details of your last search in the search boxes at the top of the screen as a reminder of what you last looked for).

All you have to do is, in the second and third row of your search options:

- Change the database’s default **AND** to **OR** on the left of each search box (this is so that you find any appearance of your word(s) / phrase(s) whether they’re in a record on their own or there are two or three together in the same place)
- In the middle (second) search box type in the search terms from your first column of concepts – **REMEMBER!** – These terms have to be related to the ones you’ve just searched for as a subject. In the case of the example here, it would be the search terms related to refugees.
- Each set of terms needs to be separated by the command **OR** (it isn’t case sensitive so you can use upper or lower case letters and it will still work)
- If you’re putting in a phrase e.g. asylum seeking then you should enclose it in speech marks, “asylum seeking”, so that the database looks for asylum immediately followed by seeking. Otherwise, without the speech marks, the database (or search engine) will look for your words anywhere in e.g. the abstract, whether they’re side by side or five paragraphs apart.
- If you’re looking for e.g. asylum seeking but you also want to look for asylum seeker(s) then you can also use the truncation tool—an asterisk—to get PsycINFO to look for any word beginning with the letters in front of the asterisk, no matter the ending. e.g. “asylum seek*” will find: asylum seeker / seekers / seeking
- So when you put all of those tools together and type out your search for the second and third boxes on the search screen you should have something that looks like this:
  
  Refugees OR “asylum seek*” OR displaced

- Before clicking on search you will also need to tell the database **where** to look for your terms. To the left of the second box select AB Abstract and to the left of the third box select TI Title
- You can then click on search and the database will show you results for any of your terms it found in the locations you told it to search (subject via the DE prefix; abstract; title)
Please note: You do not put DE “Refugees” in boxes 2 & 3 for the abstract / title search. This is because DE is a specific code that tells the database to look for a subject descriptor which is only in a particular section of the record. For the abstract / title searches you only put the keywords in (as above)

Example

Search One
Any Subject Headings you find in box one
Refugees OR “Asylum Seek*” OR Displaced → in boxes 2 & 3

Search Two
Any Subject Headings you find in box one
“Posttraumatic stress disorder” OR “Complex PTSD” OR DESNOS OR “Post-traumatic stress” OR PTSD → in boxes 2 & 3

Search Three
Any Subject Headings you find in box one
“Health professionals” OR nurses OR “occupational therapists” OR counselors

Next Steps
Combining your searches together
Once you’ve done all of your individual searches—looking for variant terms using the command OR—you will need to combine those individual searches together to see whether there is any article, or group of articles, that no matter what terms you looked for came up in your results every single time.

When you want to combine different searches together you will need to view your search history. Under your search boxes at the top of the screen is a row of links, click on ‘Search History’
Your search history should now open up (between your search boxes and your results, so your results will be pushed down the page).

To the left of each individual search will be a tick-box. At the top of the search history box—on the left-hand side—there will be a ‘Select/deselect all’ tick-box if you want to select and combine everything you’ve looked for.

Tick the items you want to combine – because each search is made up of two parts (part 1 = only the thesaurus search; part 2 is thesaurus with abstract / title) we only need to tick the even numbered searches as in the next image.
Once you’ve selected the searches you want to combine, click on the **Search with AND** button at the top of the search history box. This will then remove any article that didn’t show up in every one of your individual searches.

So here you can see that, despite quite large numbers of results for the individual searches, when we combine them together we’ve gone down to 52. It won’t always go down to such a low amount but it is possible.

**Saving your search**

To save your search so that you can re-run it without having to type everything in again you will need to click on the ‘Save Searches / Alerts’ link at the top of the search history box.

If you don’t tick any boxes the database will save all of your searches. If some of your searches went wrong and you don’t want to include them you can tick the
boxes for the searches that worked, then click on the ‘Save Searches’ link and go from there.

Figure 21: Save searches link
This will then take you to a page where you can name your search.

Figure 22: Naming and saving your search
You can only see the search description when you’re in edit mode so you can leave that field blank. If you’re going to search more than one EBSCO database then it’s a good idea to put the name of the database in with the title of your search.

It’s saved as a permanent search by default.

Click on Save when you’re done.
On the next screen you’ll get confirmation of your search title and the database it was performed in.

Figure 23: Confirming save

Click on Continue and you’ll be redirected to your personal folder where you can see all of the searches you’ve saved within the EBSCO platform as a whole.
Next Steps
Once you’ve saved your search you may still need to narrow it down further using some of the options in the sidebar on the left-hand side of the results screen. To get back to that screen click on the ‘Back’ link in the top-left of the page.

Limiting results using the sidebar
The sidebar is divided into sections and only a selection will be covered here.

For the ‘Limit To’ section you should always click on the **Show More** option as a lot of choices will be hidden behind that link. (see Figure 27)

Your results will include different types of material. If you only want one of the options you can tick the box. If you want e.g. Academic Journals **and** Dissertations you will need to click on ‘Show More’ and then select from the box that appears and click on Update when done.
When you click on ‘Show More’ underneath your date range slider this box will appear (this is only the top section, there are more choices available).

The key things to select here are ‘Peer Reviewed’ and also selecting what date range you would like your results to be limited to.
If you are bi-lingual or multi-lingual then you can select those articles for inclusion. The majority of the content will be in the English language but not all of it. The article’s title and abstract will usually be translated into English but the main article itself will be in the original language and there is no translation service available.

You can select by the age group of the population you’re researching but don’t forget that if you can see the ‘Show More’ link it’s a good idea to click on it to view all of the available options.
You will often have the option of narrowing down by gender.

There may also be the opportunity to narrow down by methodology but you may find it more useful to search for terminology in the abstract / title related to the methodology instead as this may garner more results.

If you’re interested in a particular test or measure you may be given the option to narrow your search via the sidebar, or you could look within the abstract for that information.
Caveats
Even in a database that has its own thesaurus there’s no, 100%, guarantee that every single record has a subject heading attached to it. (This is why we don’t just search the thesaurus, but also look in the title and abstract.) For this reason, if you use the subject heading option from the sidebar to narrow your results down you run the risk of eliminating any records that don’t have any subject headings attached.

Screening your results
Whether you have 35 or 3500 results in your list, it won’t be good practice to read them all so you will need to have a process of screening your results to determine which articles are worth your time and effort.

Part One
First of all you will need to be able to view a more detailed record. Above your first result, on the right-hand side, you should see a drop-down option for ‘Page Options’. Click on that and select ‘Detailed View’
This will then expand each result to show the abstract and subject headings for each article from your results.

Part Two

Once your results are displaying in their expanded view you can now go through them. Read the title and abstract of the article and use that information to determine whether the article looks useful / relevant and also whether it’s worth hours of your time to read through / make notes and so on.

If you decide it isn’t relevant simply go to the next article and repeat the process. If you think it is relevant then you can click on the blue folder to the immediate right of the article title and this will then be added to your personal account so that when you log out and log back in again the article(s) will still be there. If you created a folder in your personal folder space (back when you first created your account) then, when you click on the blue folder, you will see a list of available folders that you can move articles into. Click on the title of the folder to move the article(s) there.

If there is full-text access you will be able to read / save / print the article. If we don’t have access—either electronically or in print—then you will need to request the article as an inter-library loan and more information about that process can be found on the inter-library loans page here: https://www.derby.ac.uk/services/library/using-the-library/inter-library-loans/
Further help
This leaflet has been designed to provide guidance on completing an advanced search in PsycINFO if you have never done an advanced search in this much detail before, or to act as a refresher if you’ve recently had a group session or individual appointment on searching PsycINFO for articles on your topic(s) of research.

If you have any questions, or if your search does not seem to be working effectively, please contact your Academic Librarian for help and advice.

You can book an appointment with them using the online form here: https://libcal.derby.ac.uk/appointments/ (please remember to choose the right person/option for the subject/what you need help with once you’ve selected the site you want the appointment to take place at).

You can also find their contact details on their subject guides. Go here: https://libguides.derby.ac.uk/ for a list of areas and subject guides available.

Help us improve this guide!
Was there anything about this guide that was particularly confusing?
Were there any steps missing in the instructions?
Were there any figures missing from the instructions that would have improved your understanding of, and engagement with, the process of searching?

If you would like to give anonymous feedback on the usefulness of / issues with the guide, please fill out this form: https://tinyurl.com/y8aqxs3x