



COMDIS-HSD writing workshop

How to do a literature search

Many well-published authors are still learning new things about online literature search tools such as PubMed. They are powerful resources but you need to take a planned approach rather than rely on luck for the best results.

1

Search engines and databases

Understand the difference between a search engine and a database. For example, PubMed is a search engine that allows you to access the literature database, Medline.

2

Understand your search terms

If you want to interact with Medline sensibly, you will need to understand MeSH terms (Medical Subject Headings). MeSH are structured like tree trunks and branches; there are 16 main subject headings (tree trunks) that expand into specific search categories (branches). These headings and categories allow you to set precise parameters for your search. There are useful quick tours and tutorials on the PubMed site and practice will pay off.

3

Take a strategic approach

Take a strategic approach to your literature search. Sit down with a pen and paper and work out the possible combinations of your search terms before you start searching.

4

Pick up the grey literature

If you want to extend your search to other types of literature, such as WHO guidelines and government documents, use Google Scholar. This is another search engine that will pick up the grey literature not included in PubMed.

5

Open repositories and recommendations

Don't overlook other methods for your literature search. Open repositories are an excellent resource, as are the references cited at the end of papers. Talking to colleagues and experts is another good route to the most relevant research.

Summarised from a presentation by Dr Ajay Kumar as part of The Union and MSF SORT-IT course

