

# Choosing Keywords

Keyword selection is one of the most vital parts of your search techniques. You can type an assignment or dissertation title into Google, [Google Scholar](#) or [Discovery](#) and you will get results. You can just type in words that occur to you, and you will find material. However, you can dramatically improve what you are retrieving with a little thought and also by using the **advanced search** that each of those offers.

Let's take an example where your assignment or project title is concerned with 'preserving privacy through social networking decentralization'. Typing that phrase into Discovery, for example, will find some 4500 items. You might think that's enough to be going on with but by the time you've refined your results – perhaps by date or by source type – there may be very little material of any use.

If we start to think about alternative terms, we can widen the pool of our original search and include more relevant articles.

For 'social networking' we might think of 'social network services' or 'SNS' (or even 'S.N.S.' which most databases will treat as a different search) or 'social media' or perhaps even 'online interaction'. Note that these are not all synonymous but may be the preferred term for a subject area, or a term used by some authors, or close enough to give relevant results.

For 'privacy' we might think about 'anonymity' and/or 'security' and the latter might lead us on to ideas such as 'data handling' or 'data privacy' or 'data security'.

We can consider using phrase searches to increase relevance: "social network services" (with the double quotes, will find fewer items than simply typing social network services, but the fewer results will almost certainly be more relevant.

We might consider different spelling such as 'decentralization' or 'decentralisation'; or we could try using the truncation feature of most databases to search for several words at once, e.g. decentrali\* would find 'decentralization' or 'decentralisation' or 'decentralising' etc. Note that you can't always use truncation within a phrase search – although Discovery now allows this. Note also that Google will ignore punctuation, such as truncation or full stops in abbreviations, except for " " which it treats as a phrase search.

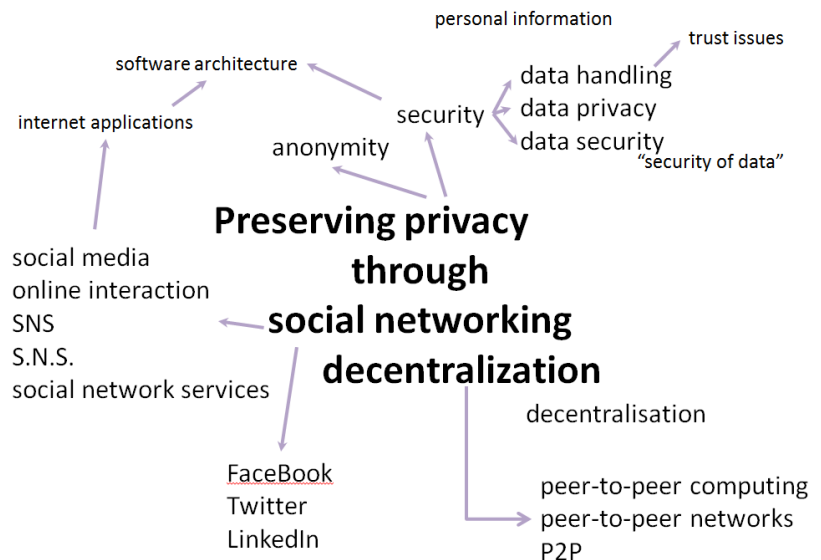
If you're finding too much material, you might choose to use narrower keywords, for example instead of 'social networking' try 'facebook' or 'linkedin' (X, formerly 'twitter', is going to be difficult!).

If you're finding too little, you might need to broaden your search. The mindmap on the following page shows an example of how you might develop your thinking, but this will be an ongoing process and this map, or lists of words if you prefer, will be an ongoing, organic process that will develop as your knowledge of a topic grows. Our Library Guide [Applying a Search Strategy](#) gives you a form that can help with thinking through this process.

When you find an article, look out for keywords that a database or author or publisher has assigned. Even if the actual paper is not relevant, you might get good ideas for your keywords from these to reutilize in your subsequent searches.

Some databases offer a thesaurus which can help with keyword selection. [Engineering Village](#) – very useful for computing subject searches – is a good example.

Note that you may find terms referred to as 'keywords', 'subject headings' or perhaps 'descriptors'.



Now take a look at how thinking about our search terms can affect an **advanced** search on Discovery. Instead of:

“social networking”  
AND  
decentralization  
AND  
privacy

which at time of writing produces over 3000 results (which is already better than typing the topic as a phrase into the simple search box as above), we might try:

“social networking” OR “social network services” OR sns OR s.n.s.  
AND  
decentrali\*  
AND  
privacy OR anonymity OR security

which gives over 25,000 results. A much bigger pool of relevant results with which to refine our search by date or source type etc.

For more on using OR and AND (as well as NOT), see our Library Guide on [Boolean Logic](#).

### In summary:

Think about the keywords you use in the Library Catalogue, in database searching, or in Google or Google Scholar. Consider:

- Alternative words – lift/elevator; colour/color
- Note tips such as truncation: comput\* will search (in most databases but not Google) for computer, computers, computing etc.
- Watch out for punctuation such as hyphens which Google ignores but many databases treat as a separate search (e.g. ecommerce, e-commerce OR “electronic commerce”)
- Use “ “ to search for phrases “peer-to-peer computing”
- Try out related keywords: social media, social network
- If you’re finding too much, narrow down your search
- If you’re finding too little, broaden your search out