This is a Brief Online Learning Tutorial (or BOLT) brought to you by the LISTEN project, a HRSA-funded project focused on improving the information literacy competencies of nursing students and professional nurses.
Putting your clinical question into an answerable form really isn’t difficult. This BOLT will help you determine the database search terms utilizing the steps of PICO: patient/problem, intervention, comparison, and outcome. The words that you select for each of these steps will give you your first clues as to the words that you might use in a database search.
Once you have defined the terms to address the formula PICO then you must determine how you will search. The general question asked here is how to manage pain in a geriatric patient. See the terms above and think about what terms would work best. Will you use Index terms or text words when you search? Which one is best?
Most databases, including PubMed/MEDLINE and CINAHL allow index terms and text word searching. Index terms should be your first choice for searching any database. Index terms organize the literature using standardized terminology to make it easier to find everything that is relevant to your search. They also eliminate the need to think of things like variant spellings or synonyms (like acetaminophen or paracetamol). When completeness is important to you, use index terms. In PubMed/MEDLINE they are called MeSH (Medical Subject Heading) terms and in CINAHL they are called CINAHL subject headings.
Text word searching can be a good choice for finding articles. They can be used when index terms are unavailable, and they can also be used with index terms. One problem with text word searching is variant spellings, such as hematology and haematology. Synonyms, or different words that mean the same thing, can be another problem. For example, renal or kidney can refer to the same thing, so use both. AIDS can be used as a text word in a search, however it will also refer to the disease but to hearing aids, aid to dependent families, and so on.

Text words have an advantage over index terms when there is no index term for the concept that you are looking for. If you are looking for something that is new or ground breaking, then text word it. Or if you are looking for something rare or unusual, a text word search would be good for this too. This can also be a way to find particular studies, like GUSTO for Global Utilization of Strategies to Open occluded arteries.
In this example, a combination of index terms and text words are appropriate. We will use PubMed/MEDLINE for the purposes of this example. In PubMed, geriatric patients can be represented by the index term Aged which covers the 65 and older age group. Pain management can be covered by the index term Analgesia. Combining these two terms with AND will likely produce a large number of hits, so you may want to insert a text word, Comparison, to further reduce your results to just articles that compare different pain management options. Of course, you could further refine your search by adding additional index terms or text words, but this shows you how the two kinds of search terms can work together.
Continue to visit the LISTEN website, at listenuphealth.org, for more helpful tips on using technology and seeking, evaluating, and applying information in nursing to support evidence-based nursing practice.
Developed by
Richard Nollan, MLS, MA
LISTEN Grant Health Science Librarian

This project is supported by funds from the Division of Nursing (DN), Bureau of Health Professions (BHP), HRSA, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). The information or content and conclusions are those of the author and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any official endorsement be inferred by, the DN, BHP, HRSA, DHHS, or the US Government.