Literature searching:
Refining your search

Search limits

Search limits should be applied at the end of your search after you have retrieved all the results relevant to your topic. Apply limits one at a time so you can see what effect they have on your results.

Most databases allow you to limit your searches by publication year, language, and publication type. Each database offers a different range of limits:

- **Publication date.** Although this may not be directly relevant to the topic, you will usually be expected to focus on current research and the exclusive use of older references may go against you; in general only include older material when the document is particularly significant. The absence of any recent publications might indicate that the topic is no longer of much interest, and you should consider changing it.

- **Foreign language material.** Notice if you have a lot of information in foreign languages or of non-British origin; some of the art databases, for example, are international in coverage and while North American and Western European publications are readily accessible, those from other countries may not be. Also avoid choosing an Italian writer or artist for your subject if most of the published literature is in Italian and you do not understand it.

- **Material type.** It is often possible to limit to type of material e.g. academic or peer-reviewed journal articles, book reviews, correspondence, editorials etc.

- **Full-text.** Most databases offer the option to limit to full-text articles but this is not advisable in a systematic review where you should demonstrate that you have been comprehensive in your search and not just selected articles that are conveniently available. Publishers often put embargos on recent content so limiting to full-text could possibly result in new research being missed.
Search filters

- Using too many limits may narrow your search too far; for this reason you could consider using search filters as an alternative. Search filters are pre-tested strategies that identify the higher quality evidence from the vast amounts of literature indexed in the major medical databases.

- “Filters exist for most types of experimental design, and are comprised of index terms relating to study type and specific terms associated with the methodological description of good experimental design.” (SIGN)

- Filters can be used to restrict your search in a number of ways, for example to limit your results to RCTs, observational studies etc.

- Apply a filter after running the subject part of your search as normal and retrieving your results. Combine your subject search results with the final stage of the filter using AND (to retrieve articles which match your search topic AND meet the filter criteria).

- PubMed has a Clinical Queries feature, which uses "built-in search filters that will limit retrieval to citations to articles reporting research conducted with specific methodologies, including those that report applied clinical research." (PubMed, 2010)

**TIP!** It is usually very difficult to limit to articles about the UK. Usually geographic filters (e.g. in Cinahl) limit to articles published in the selected country rather than articles about the country.