

Guide to Research and Writing Skills

For students in FMHI and some CBCS courses

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This guide addresses some of the research and writing skills necessary to succeed as a researcher in the behavioral health fields. Topics include: searching for “best practices” and “evidence-based practices”; citing websites and tables; and sources of help in the USF Libraries system for your research and writing.

“Best practices” is a phrase that connotes an accepted methodology. It means just what you think it means: the best way to do something to achieve an objective or to complete an item, even if the proof is based on generally accepted techniques. For an example in children’s mental health, consider “Wraparound.” Empirical evidence supports Wraparound as an effective treatment model for serving youth and their families in community settings; however, research has not rigorously tested the core concepts across populations under controlled conditions.

Your professor may also refer to “evidence-based practices” or EBP. In that case, the practices are based on proven results. This term is specific to the mental and medical health fields and implies preferred interventions and treatments because they have been proven to be effective through research. Washing your hands regularly prevents the spread of all kinds of diseases. That’s not just a good idea or a best practice; it is an evidence-based practice because it has been scientifically proven to be effective. When your professor talks about “evidence-based practices,” he or she is referring to a format that has been tested and has yielded reliable and useful results. Although the terms may be used interchangeably, there is a difference between them. This video addresses ways to find articles that represent best practices and evidence-based practices and it recommends sites that are promising.

Let’s start with some sites you can search and examine some of my searches.

<http://www.ahrq.gov/> The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality is a federal agency whose mission is to improve the delivery of health care, ranging from decision-making at the policy level to the hands-on caregiver bedside. AHRQ is part of the Department of Health and Human Services.

I did a search on the AHRQ site for “best practices” and got **7430** hits. That’s way too many returns to sort through. When I refined my search to “best practices” *and* autism, the search returned **28** hits. When I further narrowed the search terms to “best practices” *and* autism *and* "African Americans" *and* male, I had only **one** hit.

Conclusion 1: Some number of terms is good; too many is bad. Each search topic is different so see what works in your database.

When I searched on “mental health” *and* “evidence-based practices” I had **10** hits. When I used the singular form of the second term, I had only **6** hits.

I repeated this search using the terms “mental health” *and* “best practices” with a result of **33** hits; using “mental health” *and* “best practice” returned only **13** hits.

Conclusion 2: Using keywords successfully requires that you use your imagination to identify terms and shades of terms that will be useful. Use terms in both their singular and plural forms.

There is a way to search without the bother of trying a term in the singular and then plural, or in its many other forms. Wildcards are the term for substituting an * or ? (just which one depends on your database) for the rest of a word. I tried the wild cards * and ? in the following formats on the above searches: “mental health” *and* “best practice*” and “mental health” *and* “best practice?”. Both searches returned **13** hits (the same **13** hits as I got for the search “mental health” *and* “best practice”).

Conclusion 3: Not all websites honor wild cards.

Let’s look at some other useful sites.

www.nctsn.org The National Child Traumatic Stress Network offers useful fact sheets for dealing with children and families. A search for “evidence-based” brought up 115 results, including evidence-based clearinghouse, evidence-based practices, evidence-based interventions, evidence-based psychosocial treatments....

Conclusion 4: Sometimes less specific search terms are more productive.

Let’s step back and look at just two perspectives on evidence-based practices. If you are thinking about the service-delivery environment, then you may be searching for trauma-informed service systems. If you are thinking about treatment therapy, then you may be searching for trauma-specific treatment services.

Conclusion 5: Have a clear idea of your approach to the topic.

www.samhsa.org The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration is a government agency that offers access to excellent documents about behavioral health, interventions, and treatments. Like other data sites, choosing your search terms matters, using

“quotation marks“ around a two-word term matters, and substituting synonyms matters. For example, the search on “best practices” *and* alcohol returned over 300 more hits than did the search on “evidence-based” *and* alcohol. Those terms may mean the same to you but they carry different weight in the database.

Conclusion 6: Each database can use its own definition of terms. What works in one may not be the same in another.

Conclusion 7 : Keep a log of what databases you searched in, on what days, using what terms. Write down any other terms you would like to search on, mark out the ones that did not work in that database, and what combination of terms you found most useful. This log will keep you from repeating a search when you could be working more productively on new terms or in another database.

Other potential search sites:

www.nasmhpd.org The National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors (NASMHPD) (pronounced “NASH-bid”) represents the \$37 billion public mental health service delivery system serving people in all 50 states, 4 territories, and the District of Columbia. NASMHPD is a source for research findings and best practices, in its role as a national organization that examines emerging public policy issues. The NASMHPD Research Institute (NRI) compiles data and conducts research on various aspects of state mental health system financing, staffing, clinical services, and interactions with other public service systems. They maintain a database that is searchable for data and topics concerning mental health; and an extensive list of hyperlinked links to other mental health sites.

www.cdc.gov The Center for Disease Control and Prevention is a reliable source of data and policy information. You can search on “best practices” and [YOUR TOPIC] and [POPULATION]. For example, I searched on “best practices” *and* suicide *and* “military veterans” which brought up **195** documents covering morbidity and mortality tables, the hotline, and an analysis of needs of the indigenous populations of the US (which include suicide prevention counseling).

How about the USF databases? Let’s think about how to search there so you find relevant returns.

Here are some overarching concepts for databases:

- 1) Always run the advanced search, since it uses subject headings to pull articles for you.
- 2) Choose only one subject heading if you have a choice from your search. That way, you can combine them manually instead of letting the computer lump all kinds of subject headings together for you.

- 3) Combine terms with **AND** to reduce the number of relevant articles.
- 4) For further refinement, use the ADDITIONAL LIMITS in PsycInfo, or apply an additional term in PUBMED with the “AND” feature in the search string.
- 5) Always find the primary source, which is the original work by the author. By contrast, a secondary source is the work that refers to another author’s work. You cannot rely on an author to interpret someone else’s ideas and text. Since you are learning to research and write well, you must find the original source material and cite it. At the risk of sounding redundant, I repeat: NEVER cite a secondary resource in your research paper.
- 6) Wikipedia is not a scholarly source of information. Do not use it in your research or cite it in your references.
- 7) When you quote a source, keep it short. Long quotes may require permission from the copyright holder. Be sure to credit an idea, as well as the actual text, to the author to avoid any shade of plagiarism.

Here’s one more chunk of information that may make your research papers less burdensome: how to cite a table and how to cite a website. Papers written for courses in behavioral sciences usually follow the APA format, 6th edition. If you plan to study in some aspect of this field, you should do yourself a favor and buy the manual and read it cover to cover, marking those pages you need all the time.

For now, let’s review how to cite a website.

Here’s one that I pulled up that might look like something you will come across in your research and may want to cite. Suppose you want to refer to the first paragraph in the body of your paper. Since the title is so long, you may use a shortened version in the in-text citation:

(Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], “Learn about the costs”, 2011, para. 1). For subsequent in-text citations, use (CDC, 2011, para. 1).

Use this format in the References section of your paper:

Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2011). Learn About the Costs of Violent Deaths: Violence is a significant economic burden costing society about \$47 billion a year in total medical and work loss costs.
http://www.cdc.gov/Features/dsWISQARScost/?s_cid=w_c_ds_cont_001

Here’s the table from the CDC. . Remember that just because a table, chart, picture, or graph appears online does not give you permission to use it without proper citation information. You may need to obtain permission from the copyright holder to use non-print material if you reprint or adapt it in your work. APA does not offer a hard-and-fast rule on permissions Following is the correct in-text citation for the table:

(Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2011, table "Total Combined Medical and Work Loss Costs of Violent Deaths, by Sex and Intent, U.S. 2005"). For subsequent in-text citations, use (CDC, 2011, table "Total Combined Medical and Work Lost Costs").

Use the following format in the References section of your paper:

Center for Disease Control and Prevention, (2011). Table "Total Combined Medical and Work Loss Costs of Violent Deaths, by Sex and Intent, U.S. 2005."
http://www.cdc.gov/Features/dsWISQARScost/?s_cid=w_c_ds_cont_001

Remember that the librarians can show you how to use the USF databases, help you sort through subject headings, and offer ideas as to where to look for further research. You may also get additional help on your paper in person through the Writing Center, located in the Main Library, 2nd floor, and through their online services.

1) *The Writing Center* offers students pre-scheduled 50 minute one-on-one consultations, or 25 minute same day consultations. Graduate students have access to both writing consultants and subject librarians. Writing Center Consultants are graduate students from the Departments of English, World Languages, and Communications, all of whom have been writing instructors in addition to working as center consultants. The Writing Center website is:

<http://guides.lib.usf.edu/writing>

2) *SmartThinking* is an online tutoring, writing services, *and* homework help service. Tutors are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in a variety of subjects that include Statistics and Writing. They will help you to rework your paper focusing on several areas of concern, such as organization, tone, and clarity; they will not edit or rewrite your paper.

3) *Atomic Learning's Technology Skills Collection*. This is an online library of thousands of short tutorial movies that will answer the "how do I do that" for all major software applications, including Microsoft, Adobe, and Apple programs, and others.

Use this website: <http://learningcommons.myweb.usf.edu> to visit Atomic Learning or SmartThinking.

As a final note for researchers: Be sure to look at the other videos in the FMHI Library series, located on the FMHI library page, <http://guides.lib.usf.edu/FMHI-Library>, under the chocolate-colored "Instructional Videos" tab.

That's a lot of information! If you are still stuck, make an appointment with a librarian. Bring your questions. Come prepared with your topic and your problem so we may make good use of your time.