Think about and define your topic:

In one or two sentences summarize your search topic in your own words. If you are having trouble, try phrasing it as a question.

Identify the Main Concepts

From the statements or questions above, pick out the main ideas or concepts. In your search statement you will combine these terms using the AND operator. The AND operator narrows your search result by requiring all the concepts to be included in your search results.

First Concept AND Second Concept AND Third Concept

Note: You might not have three concepts – this is only a sample. Sometimes there may be two, sometimes four.

Develop a List of Search Terms

For each concept in your topic, list other words that could be used in writing about that concept, e.g. synonyms, alternate spellings, related terms, broader or narrower terms.
In your search statement, you will broaden your search results by using the OR operator to indicate that any of these terms is acceptable for that concept.

First Concept AND Second Concept AND Third Concept

Note: Most search engines allow for truncation of terms. That way you can pick up variant spellings and plurals. For example, in BobCat, canad* will retrieve canada, canadian, canadians, etc.. Each database has its own rules. Truncation symbols may be * $ ? or #.

What NOT to Include

Some terms related to your search may generate results that are off topic. They should be explicitly excluded if possible. Many search engines allow the NOT operator in addition to AND and OR. Others, such as Google, use the minus sign before a word or phrase to exclude it (e.g.: new york -yankees -mets). You may also want to exclude certain types of documents, such as book reviews.