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A short guide to literature searching



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A short guide to literature searching

What is literature searching?

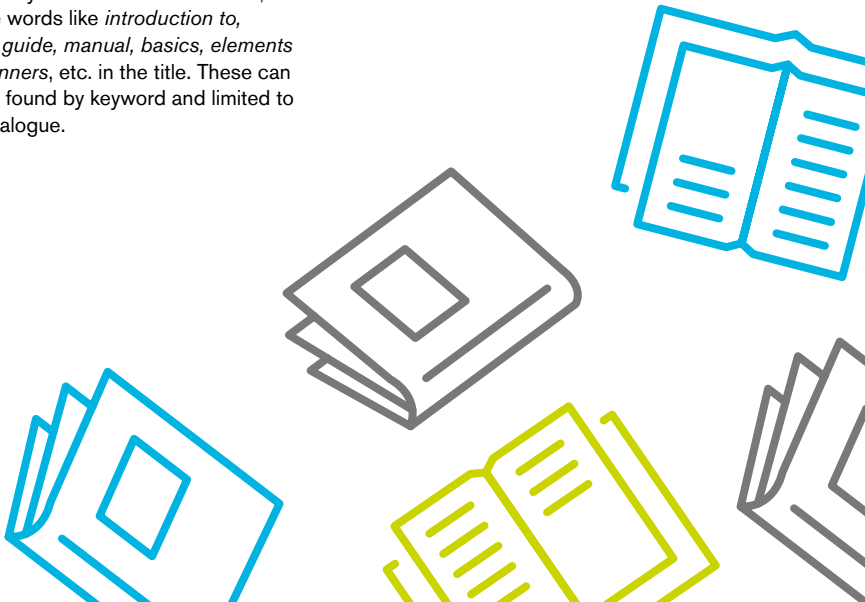
For any academic work that you have to do – an essay, dissertation or project – you will need to do some reading and searching for information. 'Literature searching' just means using the library catalogues, databases and other search tools to find the best sources of information for your task.

This booklet suggests a logical, step-by-step approach to doing this.



1. Find your bearings: Reference works

- If you are unfamiliar with a topic, find a good encyclopedia article about it. This should give a balanced overview of it, give a history of its study, place it in the context of current scholarship, summarise any conflicting theories or controversies, and provide a basic bibliography for further reading.
- There are electronic encyclopedias now in most major subjects, but a lot of printed and specialised encyclopedias are still useful. The best way to find them is to do a keyword search on FindIt using a broad subject term + 'encyclopedia' – eg. '*poetry encyclopedia*', '*education encyclopedia*', etc., and narrow the search scope to Library Catalogue.
- Other useful sources of orientation would be introductory textbooks or handbooks, which have words like *introduction to*, *handbook*, *guide*, *manual*, *basics*, *elements of*, *for beginners*, etc. in the title. These can likewise be found by keyword and limited to Library Catalogue.
- There is nothing wrong with using Wikipedia for orientation, as long as you follow up their references and don't rely solely on information in Wikipedia for an essay. Most Wikipedia entries for academic topics nowadays are very good, but be wary of those which have a note saying '*this article is a stub*', or ones which have too many comments like [citation needed].
- Specialist dictionaries can be useful for defining unfamiliar terms. In academic essays, you often have to define the terms you are using, even if you know what they mean, so these dictionaries can help. Search for eg. '*electronics dictionary*' and limit to Library Catalogue.



2. Read around your topic: monographs (ie books)

- It is important to read around your topic to gain a fuller understanding of it and its context.
- Don't just read the books suggested on your resource list. For every one book suggested there, we are likely to have several others which treat the same topic from different standpoints, and in varying levels of detail.
- Find books (both electronic and printed) by typing in general keywords – eg. '*German romantic poetry*', '*economics tourism*' '*mathematics teaching*' etc. and limit to Library Catalogue.
- Once you find a title which looks useful, you can extend your search for books on the subject by clicking on the title of the book to see the Details and then either following one of the links next to Subjects (this will find other books that have the same subject heading) or by using the Browse Similar feature at the bottom of the page (this will show you other books with the same classmark).



3. In-depth discussion: journal articles

- Academic journal articles, conference papers and specialist reports are where academics first publish their research findings and thoughts about any subject, so that is where the most detailed and up to date discussion of any topic is to be found. It can take several years for this information to be 'digested' and published in book form.
- The best way to find such articles is to use one of the specialist bibliographic databases (sometimes known as indexing or abstracting databases). Go to the Databases tab and select your subject from the first filter menu, and Bibliographic Databases from the second filter menu:
- Using specialist databases is preferable to using Article Search on FindIt or Google because: they are restricted only to your subject, so there is less danger of irrelevant hits; they often have sophisticated search features such as limiters, controlled vocabulary, filters by subject and types of publication which are appropriate to that subject; they can save search histories, set up alerts, export results to RefWorks or Endnote, etc.
- Google Scholar is also useful, particularly for finding material on very specialised topics. It can be used as a back-up to ensure that you have done a thorough search. Google Scholar looks and behaves like the ordinary Google, except that it only indexes registered academic and research websites, so that is a good guarantee of the quality of material found.



Filter by:

Health Sciences All

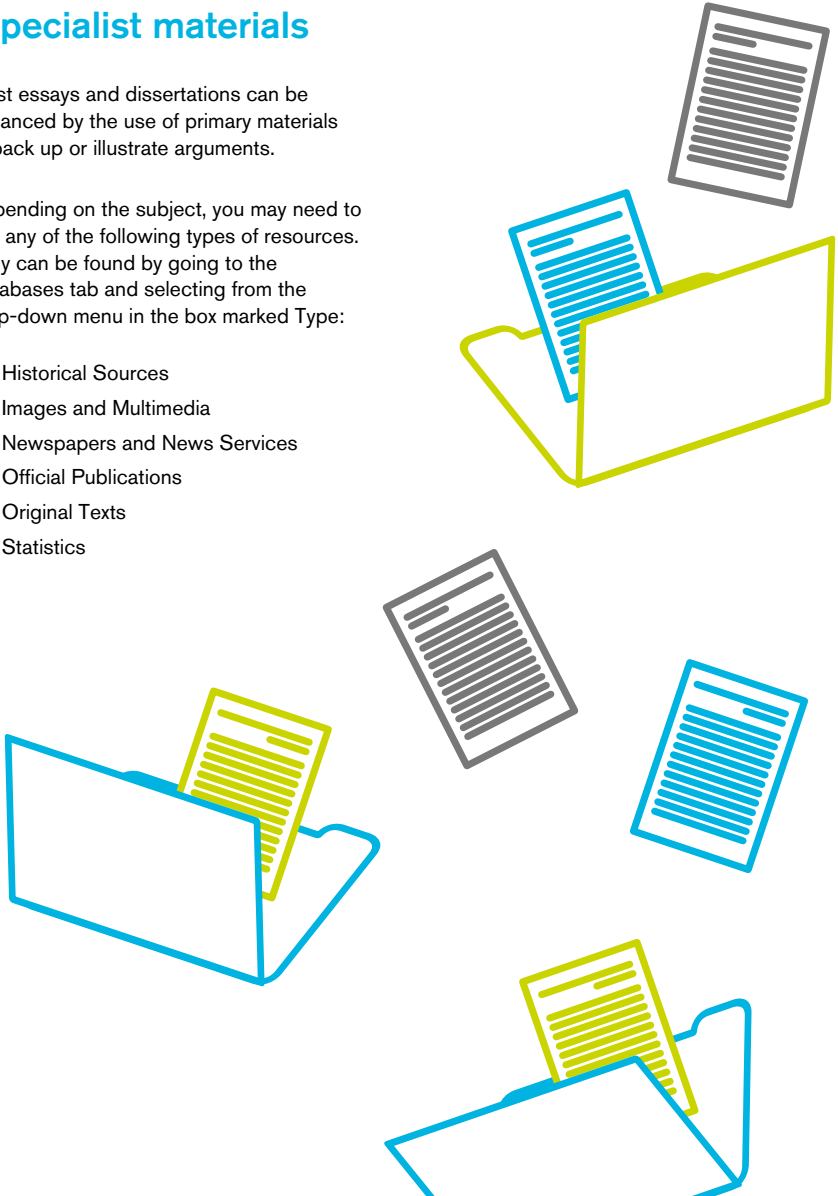
Type: Bibliographic Databases



It is likely to become more useful as time goes on because more and more institutions are publishing their research findings in open-access repositories which Google Scholar picks up. It is, however, a lot less flexible in searching than the bibliographic databases.

4. Back up your arguments: specialist materials

- Most essays and dissertations can be enhanced by the use of primary materials to back up or illustrate arguments.
- Depending on the subject, you may need to use any of the following types of resources. They can be found by going to the Databases tab and selecting from the drop-down menu in the box marked Type:
 - Historical Sources
 - Images and Multimedia
 - Newspapers and News Services
 - Official Publications
 - Original Texts
 - Statistics







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Edgbaston, Birmingham,
B15 2TT, United Kingdom
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