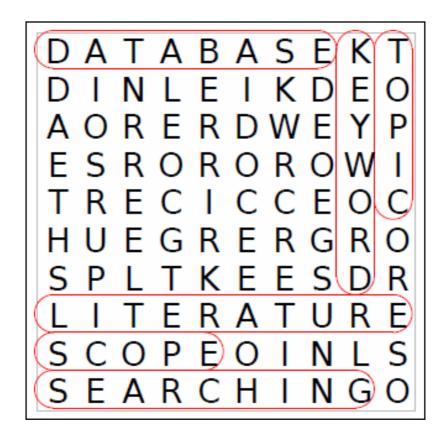# Writtle College

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Research pt 2: Literature searching for your project

This guide will help you search for information for your assignments and dissertation.

Introduction

A review of the literature is important for a research project because it enables you to acquire an understanding of your topic, and an awareness of relevant research that has already been conducted. Exploring and selecting from the vast array of published information can be a time-consuming task, so it is important to know how to plan and carry out this work effectively. You need to work systematically through the following stages:

Define topics

Clarify the meaning of the topic and/or particular words. Dictionaries relating to the subject or an encyclopedia may be useful here.

Decide on scope and boundary

If the area/topic is a large one you may need to choose a specific aspect. Bear in mind any resource constraints like time; support available; library resources; and the length of the assignment to be written.

Define topic in terms of "keywords"

Define your topic in terms of words to search for in the various information sources.

- Think of words that may be used as alternatives for your topic e.g. *football and soccer*. Some online information sources include a thesaurus of terms known as "descriptors" which help you to do this.

- Think about alternative meanings and contexts for your keywords and try to think of ways of combining words to ensure that only the meaning you want is retrieved – words like *mouse* and *icon* now have more than one meaning.

- Think of alternative spellings, particularly American ones, e.g. *colour* or *color*, *aluminium* or *aluminum* and of possible truncations e.g. *behavio** will retrieve behaviour, behavioral and behavioural.

- Think of changes in terminology when looking for older materials. These can be due to the development of a more technical vocabulary e.g. *tuberculosis* for *consumption*, to social changes e.g. *firefighter* rather than *fireman* and politically correct language e.g. *visually impaired* rather than *blind*.

- Bear in mind the name-changes of places and countries, such as Peking/Beijing, Persia/Iran.

- Look at ways to link your keywords. See the combining search terms section of the Selecting, accessing and searching databases guide.

- There can be little consistency between databases. For example, the default settings vary so that if you type in *Japanese Gardens*, some databases will search for this as a phrase i.e. will only retrieve records where the words appear together, others will retrieve records containing both words. This makes a great difference to the number and relevance of the results received.

Set limitations to your search

- Publication date – how far back do you want to search?
- Type – what types of publication or documentation do you wish to include?
- Language – is it appropriate to limit your search to languages you can read yourself?
- Geographical– do you want to limit your search to material relating to a particular country or other geographical area?
- Country of publication – do you want only material published in a particular country or range of countries?
- Are there any other limitations, for example age or gender?

Draw up a list of sources/databases in which to search for references

Sources may be print-based or electronic-based. There are many subject specific guides to resources in the Library. As well as providing information about how to obtain material relevant to your subject, they supply links to the resources available on the Intranet.

Conduct your searches

Search through each source/database

If the resource you are using has a thesaurus, relate the keywords list that you compiled to the thesaurus keywords, e.g. one source may index material under *universities,* another may use *higher education.*

Keep a record of your searches

An essential part of literature searching is keeping accurate, consistent and correct records. These should include the years of every print-based and electronic database searched, and the terms used.

Record all useful references

The useful references should be recorded from print-based sources or marked and downloaded from electronic databases. A detailed record of everything useful you find will enable you to provide an accurate bibliography at the end of your assignment. You need to become familiar with referencing systems. At Writtle the system used is the Harvard reference system.

Review progress after searching 4 or so sources

Have you found material which is likely to be relevant to your topic? If there seems too much or too little, you may need to redefine your topic! Assess the value of the search in terms of relevance and usefulness; it's quality, not quantity of references that counts. You should also seek guidance from your lecturers and Subject Librarians as to how many references you are expected to use.

Obtain copies of promising references

Some databases have links to the full-text of the articles. It may also be useful to check the Library catalogue to see if the Library stocks the item(s) you require. If not, they may be obtained via Inter-Library Loans (if it is for your dissertation), but check the likely value of your reference before ordering. Bear in mind constraints of delivery time in relation to your deadline.

Read them!

Requires assessment, judgement and critical thought. Be wary of out-of-date, superseded, and irrelevant material. Leave some time between readings for thought and note-taking.

Write your paper

Give yourself adequate time to write your assignment and if possible create a draft copy. Ask if somebody is willing to proof read for any errors and quality of writing style. Assignments need to be accompanied by a properly formatted bibliography. Consult your lecturer for the recommended style.