

SKILLS FOR LEARNING

GUIDE TO RESEARCHING YOUR DISSERTATION

BEGINNING YOUR RESEARCH

When it comes to finding relevant sources of information for your dissertation, the primary question to ask is *'will this piece of information help me to answer my research question?'* Wherever possible, try to read primary sources (original material that no other person has subsequently analysed or summarised) as this will give you an understanding of the first-hand experiences of the original researcher than secondary sources would allow.

It is important to have a search strategy before you begin to conduct research into your chosen topic. It might be useful to follow this process:

1. Write down your research question.
2. Identify the keywords in your topic. If you're struggling to generate keywords, have a look at subject dictionaries to see the type of terms used in your subject. Also think of synonyms (words that have similar meanings) e.g. Internet/World Wide Web.
3. Try truncation. Adding a * to words or part of words widens your search and picks up alternative spellings. For example, librar* will find all words starting with that particular stem e.g. library, librarians, libraries. Inserting the * symbol into a word also takes care of alternative spellings and word endings. For example, Organi*ation will find organisation and organization.
4. Try attaching AND/OR/NOT to keywords. OR makes your search broader, AND and NOT makes it narrower. For example, obesity AND children would narrow your search by selecting records that contain both terms. Lifts OR elevators would widen your search by selecting records that contain either or both terms. Teenagers NOT children would eliminate the term children.
5. Try limiting your results by publication date and language.

If you are struggling to find relevant literature pertinent to your research question, it could be that the topic is too recent for high quality research to be published yet or too vague or broad in present form. You may need to work on your question to make it more focused and researchable.

Remember to keep a note of all the relevant literature, including full reference details and page numbers as you conduct your research. Using bibliographic management software such as RefWorks is an easy way to do this. Our **Guide to RefWorks** takes you through the process of setting up a RefWorks account. There is also a **Referencing with RefWorks** workshop.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The best place to start looking for information is through LibrarySearch (our online catalogue) and the databases in your subject area. If your searches reveal material not available at the library either electronically or in print, it may be possible to obtain items via an inter-library loan. In order to use this service, you will need to complete a form and hand it into the helpdesk at one of our libraries.

There are many other places to find information. Here are a few ideas:

- Make the most of any relevant **reading lists** that you've been given for your taught courses. Reading lists can usually be found in your module guide.
- Make use of the **university library** or other **academic libraries**. You can apply for a Sconul Card which will enable you to visit other academic libraries which are members of the Sconul scheme. For more information, visit one of our library helpdesks or go to <http://www.sconul.ac.uk/sconul-access>

- Look into gaining access to **specialist libraries**, other **information services** such as government departments, and **museums and galleries** within your field of interest.
- Try using both the **internet and intranets**. The latter often provides course materials, lecture notes and other specialist information.
- Try seeking out members of **university staff** or **local experts** such as local historians, who may have the particular knowledge you're seeking.
- Identify the most **relevant journals** in your subject and have a look through recent publications. Pay particular attention to recent articles, book reviews and letters to the editor for any mention of your subject that may be useful to your own research.
- Conduct a search into prominent writers and theorists within your subject via **search engines** such as Google. You may be able to find reference to a forthcoming conference appearance or recent publication that would be worth following up.
- **ETHOS** is a database from the British Library offering full-text access to PhD theses from the majority of British universities. Theses not immediately available for download can be digitised to order. You will need to register with the site to view content. To find out more information visit <http://ethos.bl.uk/Home.do>

EVALUATING INFORMATION

It's important to evaluate any information you are thinking of using for your dissertation. Look for research that has been tested and validated by experts in the field such as research published in peer-reviewed journals, or research reports produced by recognisable organisations such as research institutes. The Internet can also be a valuable source of information but any websites used for academic work must be critically evaluated in terms of accuracy, reliability and validity as the contents of many websites goes through no formal publishing process. For further information on this topic, see our **Guide to Evaluating Information**.



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