Your Literature Search:
A step by step guide
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Introduction

This is a guide to effectively conducting a literature search. By following the steps laid out here you will save yourself time, effort and not a little frustration. You will also have the added bonus of knowing that your literature search is as complete as reasonably possible and that you can proceed with your project or essay, with confidence.

While the wealth of electronic resources has made retrieval of information much faster, it also means that it is easier to make fundamental errors in your approach. Some initial caution and thought is a solid investment.

Defining your topic:

Before conducting your literature search, it is essential that you define your topic. Have you a clear idea of what exactly you want to study? If you have only a vague sense of your area of interest, then it is crucial to add some detail. Often writing down your topic is useful: you can identify key words and concepts and with these in mind begin your research.

Let’s take the following example of an essay.

“A Constitution for Europe – a step too far?”

Before you begin you may ask a number of questions.

What perspective are you approaching the essay from?

- Legal
- Political
- Social

What keywords would you use when searching for books or journals?

Perhaps combinations of some of the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Europe</th>
<th>Constitution</th>
<th>History</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy</td>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>Future</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Always be aware of synonyms and that, in other countries, certain terms may be used in a completely different way. For our example you may have to start using the terms: European Union or European Community or EU.
Truncation
*Using the * symbol on our Library Catalogue allows you to search for extensions of words. In this case Europe, European, Europe’s etc.*

Finding background information:

- **Encyclopaedias and Dictionaries**
  Once you have clarified your topic, it is a matter of broadening your ideas and subject knowledge. It is very important to correctly define the concepts and facts that you will be researching. Typically, background information from encyclopaedias, dictionaries, thesauri and directories, will give your research a firm basis and also provide other important sources for you to consult.

  For example if you were doing research in ‘child psychology’, the International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences, in the Humanities Reference area (Floor 1), will offer a quick reference to the major concepts and thinkers in this area.

  There are similar Encyclopaedias in all major subject areas.

- **Online Reference Sources**
  The library has access to a number of excellent online encyclopaedias and dictionaries such as:
  - Access Science
  - Oxford Reference Online
  - OED - Oxford English Dictionary

  All these resources are available from the library [http://library.nuigalway.ie/collections/referenceworks/](http://library.nuigalway.ie/collections/referenceworks/)
Using Bibliographies

One important source to check is reference bibliographies at the end of books, or chapters, that will list major books and articles within your research area. They are an effective shortcut to locating core research materials. Indeed, for example, the bibliography given at the end of this guide should point you to other research books in your research area.

Deciding on scope and boundaries:

Asking the Right Questions

It is important to make some decisions on the scope of your research. Typically, by this stage, you should be able to address the following:

- What is the scope of your research?
- Will you be limiting by country or language?
- Is there a particular range of years, or period, that you will be studying?
- Will you need to consult primary sources?

For example nursing students may have to decide whether to limit research to a particular age group or gender or area of special interest eg gerontologic care.

Be Realistic

You should have some idea about what resources are available before launching into research. A law student doing a comparative law essay, may soon regret choosing Iceland as a comparison with Ireland, when faced with the difficulty of locating relevant articles or legislation.

Primary vs. Secondary Resources

One fundamental issue is whether you consult primary or secondary sources. Primary sources provide firsthand evidence of the subject. In law they are the legislation or acts. In history primary sources may be unpublished materials such as town records, photographs, oral histories, etc. In English they may be the original text, or manuscript, of a poem or novel. In contrast, secondary materials, such as textbooks or journal articles, synthesise and interpret primary materials and generally make them more accessible to readers.
Searching for resources:

This section discusses the main research tools we have in the Library. Many of these tools are electronic in format, but may direct you to print resources. What is important to understand is that these days you may be using a range of media for research. Do not presume that everything will be in print or indeed that everything you need will be in electronic form on Library databases, or on the Internet etc. Flexibility is essential for modern research.

**Searching for Books**

The first point of reference, for any research, is the Library catalogue, use it to find:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Books</th>
<th>Journals (inc. links to electronic journals)</th>
<th>Reading List Articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reports</td>
<td>Videos / DVDs</td>
<td>Theses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your course reading list, for example, will be a good place to get started, particularly to locate general background reading that will inform your work.

**So for example:**
- *Type your topic in the search box and click on Search*
- *Use quotation marks for an exact phrase, eg: “management information systems”*

A list of items is displayed
- You can refine the results by selecting one of the options from the menu to the left of the screen.
- Options include resource type, topic, creator/author, collection, date, language and library.
- Click on print locations to find out more information, eg: location of book on the Library shelves and availability.
- Many of our books are now available as e-books. You will see ‘online access’ on the record details for the item, for example:

![Image of online access]

- Some of our books are available in electronic format only, whilst for others both the print and the electronic versions are accessible.

❖ **Searching for Journals**
To find out if we have a particular journal type in the name of the journal in the library search bar and refine results by resource type: Journals.

![Image of journal]

**This journal, like many our collection, is available online.**
- allow you to connect to the full text on another source using the SFX button
- some databases may give you the summary of an article with no full text availability. (The SFX link will check for full text availability. See page 14 for details.)
**Scholarly and Non Scholarly Journals**

It is important to realise that there are different types of journals: scholarly journals and nonscholarly.

- Scholarly journals are the more specialist and prestigious, concerned with academic research and study.
- Non-scholarly are of more general interest and include titles such as *National Geographic* and *The Economist*.

As you will see, you will go to different sources to access both types of material. Your research topic will determine which type you will use.

**Electronic Journals (full text and non full text)**

For most people it is the advent of thousands of electronic journals, in all subject areas, that has had the greatest impact, giving us full text access and improving our collections dramatically.

Some of these electronic journals are available in different ways:

- through databases (like *Science Direct*, *Business Source Complete*, *JSTOR* etc.)
- from their publishers (e.g. *Oxford Journals*) some databases do not provide direct full text (eg *Web of Science*), but allow you to connect to the full text on another source using the SFX button
- some databases may give you the summary of an article with no full text availability. (The SFX link will check for full text availability.)

**Accessing our e-resources databases:**

In recent years there has been an explosion of electronic resources. These resources greatly supplement our traditional print resource and ensure that we have far wider access to material than would otherwise be the case. For example, we have access to hundreds of newspapers through the database *Nexis; Early English Books Online (EEBO)* gives us access to rare books that otherwise would not be available.

Databases are not search engines but they search through journals, magazines, newspapers, conference proceedings and other sources. Some of them are broad in coverage (multidisciplinary) and others are subject specific.

You can find a list of databases in your subject area by using the browse, search -> By Subject and typing in databases followed by your subject. For example:
You can also use our Library Guides and Tutorials (http://libguides.library.nuigalway.ie/) to show you a list of databases and other resources in your subject area. Click on support, followed by subject support for a list of library guides and tutorials.

Step 1: Click Support on the Library Homepage

Step 2: Click Subject Support

Step 3: Find your subject to browse the list of databases
Getting to the full-text:

All databases will provide you with citations of articles relevant to your search, i.e. author name, article title, journal title, year, volume and page numbers. Many will also provide you with an abstract or short summery of the article, to help you ascertain how relevant it is going to be. Some databases even provide you with the full-text of the journal articles.

If the full text is not immediately available you may see the SFX symbol: 🔗 SFX

SFX is a linking technology that will link you from a citation in a database to the full-text of that journal, wherever the Library has made it available (often in a different database). Simply click on the SFX icon and choose the relevant option from the menu that appears.

If the library does not have a subscription to the journal you need Google Scholar can often point you to a freely available version of the article.

Using the Internet

The Internet is an obvious and powerful source for many different types of information. These days it is often the first place students turn to when researching. If you’re looking for critical academic essays – essentially good secondary literature – then the Internet may not be the best source, in comparison to the wealth of journals we now have access to.

Nevertheless, the Internet, if used with suitable caution, is an extraordinary resource. The Evaluating Records section, further on, offers excellent advice for judging the quality of the material you find. With this in mind, we suggest the following access routes for Internet searching.

❖ Search engines

The most obvious way to search for material on the Internet is via search engines. Google (www.google.com) is the most popular, indexing a huge number of web pages. Related, but quite different, is Google Scholar (scholar.google.com), a new service aimed at the academic community. It searches publishers’ websites for journal articles as well as providing links to library catalogues and other sites of academic interest. It also works with SFX allowing you to link from journal abstracts to full text (where available) on our Library databases. Finally Google Books (books.google.com) allows the full text of certain books to be searched and can be a very useful source.
**Search engine tips**

When using a search engine, try and think strategically about your search. Keep the following in mind:

- Be aware that all search engines vary in how they search for and organise information. What is not available on one may be available from another search engine. Meta search engines such as *Dogpile* (www.dogpile.com) search across a number of web engines at the same time and can be highly effective web tools, overcoming the reliance on any one web search tool.

- Use the advanced search screens, which are simple, and prompt you into far better searching habits. Even placing your phrase, or topic, within quotes """" can dramatically improve your results.

- Consult the search tips, or help pages of search engines. These will provide you with advice on getting the most from the resource.

*The Advanced Search option on Google offers sophisticated retrieval options. The same advanced search option exists for Google Scholar and will help you achieve better results.*
**Wikis**

Can I use *Wikipedia* for my research?

The safest answer to this question is to steer away from *Wikipedia* as a source for the purposes of third-level research and writing. Yes, there have been studies showing that *Wikipedia* is no less or not very less accurate than other leading encyclopedias. It’s also true that the old warning about ‘anybody being able to contribute’ to *Wikipedia* doesn’t stand up the way it once might have; *Wikipedia* have instituted a whole structure of procedures to deal with ‘vandalism’ of *Wikipedia* pages so as to maintain certain standards of accuracy.

The fact remains that *Wikipedia* is an encyclopedia, and while an encyclopedia can provide background and a foundational understanding of a topic, no encyclopedia is adequate as a source for substantial engagement in a research topic. As well, there remains no consensus among academicians that *Wikipedia* should be considered a reliable source; so as to be certain not to get into unnecessary entanglements with one’s instructor, supervisor, or the wider academic community, it’s safe practice to set *Wikipedia* aside.

As ever, *Wikipedia*, as an encyclopedia, can be a good place to start your research in that in most cases, its articles are sourced, thus providing potential pathways to further information on a topic. In many cases, so will your library’s subscription encyclopedias – so why not try one of those, as a way to start broadening out your information base?

**Wikimedia Commons**

These days, *Wikipedia* is just one part of a larger project called the *Wikimedia Commons*. One way to make use of wiki-resources is to make use of images hosted in the *Wikimedia Commons*: to spruce up a Powerpoint presentation about your research, for instance. Many of the images in the *Wikimedia Commons* are covered by *Creative Commons* licenses which give permission to use the images (usually asking that whoever is using the image give credit to the producer of the image, and to provide a link to the license). This can be a rich source for images, used in such a way that pays attention to best practice when it comes documentation and image copyright.

Here’s the link to the *Wikimedia Commons*: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page)

**Other wikis**

*Wikipedia* gets a lot of attention, but isn’t the only wiki on the internet. Here is a list of research wikis, for instance, focusing on particular subject-matter: [http://oad.simmons.edu/oadwiki/Research_wikis](http://oad.simmons.edu/oadwiki/Research_wikis)

Should you use these wikis as a research source? It depends – ask questions. Who can contribute to these wikis, and what is the process by which they are allowed to add to the wiki? What qualifications do they need to hold, if any? Is there an editorial process? What about the content, what kind of a genre does the information seem to conform to? Is it an encyclopedia or textbook? If so, does that seem like a good source to use for substantial engagement in a research paper? (hint: probably not).
Searching for completed research (theses)

One excellent resource for students is completed research, in the form of theses. The Library holds print copies of major and minor theses carried out in the University. These are not on open access and must be requested from the Library and IT Services Desk. We also have access through specialised databases to theses in the UK and USA.

- **Theses in NUI Galway**
  
  To find out what theses are held in the Library.
  
  - type in your subject or keyword search followed by the words: theses Galway

- **Searching for Theses by Database**
  
  The Library has two main theses databases:
  
  - **ETHOS: Electronic Thesis Online Service**: Providing fulltext desktop delivery of Theses
  
  - **Proquest Dissertations and Theses**: Proquest dissertations and theses is available in two options:
    
    o **Dissertations and Theses: UK & Ireland**
    
    o **Dissertations and Theses: USA & Europe**

Some full-text is available for theses published after 1997 (10% of the thesis)

Theses, from other libraries, may be ordered through the Inter-Library Loans service.
Other library catalogues

Once you are satisfied that you have checked the local sources, it is also useful to see what other libraries have on your topic. Most libraries, nowadays, have their catalogues available on the web and links are provided to these from the Library web site.

A very useful source is COPAC, which provides access to the merged online catalogues of over 90 of the largest university research libraries in the UK and Ireland.

One other extremely useful resource is WorldCat, which is a union catalogue listing millions of books available in libraries worldwide.

Worldcat allows you to search hundreds of library catalogues simultaneously. It is an excellent resource for quickly putting together a bibliography.

Evaluating records

Critical evaluation of your references is an essential component of your literature search. Firstly, it will enable you to manage the quantity of material that you find, helping you to decide which references should be obtained and read, and secondly, whether the item is of core interest, or of less importance, to your topic.

Initially, you might want to include the following when considering the appropriateness of a particular book, article, media resource or web site:

Author—what are his or her credentials and qualifications, and is he/she an expert in the subject field? Have you seen the author’s name cited in other sources and bibliographies?

- Is the author associated with a reputable institution?
- Is currency of the information important to your research topic?
- Did a scholarly press (eg, university press) publish the book?
- Was the article published in an academic rather than a popular journal?
- Check the accuracy and authority of web documents.
- You might want to consult the following resource for more detailed coverage of the critical evaluation of information sources: LARK Online (see Library web site).

**Managing References**

As you progress through your research it is essential to keep a complete and accurate record of the sources that you have consulted, and the references that you have used. Don’t rely on memory! For example, you might want to jot down the details on individual index cards, create a computer file, or use reference management software such as EndNote (see below). In this way you will avoid searching through resources for a quotation or publication details that you have already covered at the writing-up stage of your research.

Keeping track of your references will enable you to both cite references accurately and compile a complete bibliography.

- **Citing references and creating bibliographies**

  **Guide to Citing and Referencing**

  The Library has created a guide (both in print and online) to the Harvard referencing style. It explains the components of citation entries as well as providing examples of cited books, journals, and many other potential sources. Ask for a copy at the Library & IT Service Desk or access directly from the Library web site.

  **EndNote**

  EndNote is a software package designed to save time in the systematic organisation and citation of bibliographic references. It enables you to maintain a file of references, most of which can be transferred directly from sources such as databases, or the Library catalogue, without having to type them. EndNote also enables you to cite references and create bibliographies, in any one of several hundred styles eg: Harvard, MLA, or Vancouver. It is important to check with lecturers as to which style is preferred by the School.
The Library provides introductory EndNote training sessions throughout the year. For information on these, or direct booking, and to access our introductory Guide to Using EndNote please visit the EndNote Library Guides and Tutorials:

http://libguides.library.nuigalway.ie/EndNote

EndNote allows you to create bibliographies and also display references in many different citing styles. Above is an example of a library of references that EndNote can easily insert into an essay or thesis.
Locating and Obtaining Materials

- **Inter-Library Loans**

  As stated already, use the Library catalogue to see if the Library has the item that you require. If it doesn’t, we can usually obtain items through the Inter-Library Loans service. Books and theses are normally obtained for you to borrow, or consult in the Library. Journal articles are usually delivered as a photocopy, or electronically by email, either of which you can keep. Inter-Library Loan applications can be made on the Library web site, using your CASS username and password.

  http://library.nuigalway.ie/ill/

- **Pay-per-view**

  While doing your research, you might be given the opportunity of purchasing direct access to an article, using your credit card for payment. This commercial pay-per-view service, offered by many of the database (or electronic journal) suppliers, is an option when we do not have direct access to electronic journal articles via a subscription.

- **Access to other libraries**

  Alternatively, you might want to check if the item is available at another library. The Library web site has links to the catalogues of all the Irish university libraries. Under the ALCID scheme, academic staff and postgraduate students can visit participating libraries. In addition, staff and students might consider using the SCONUL Access scheme, which is the largest borrowing scheme for higher education researchers in the UK and Ireland. Full details of the scheme, together with a list of 170+ participating institutions, is available at:

  http://www.access.sconul.ac.uk/sconul-members

For further details, on both the ALCID and SCONUL Access schemes, contact Customer Services staff at 091 493399.
Keeping up to date

In any type of research it is vital to keep up to date with developments in your area of interest. In this section we suggest various mechanisms that help you to do exactly that.

- **Alerting Services**
  Many journal and database publishers provide alerting services for free. Once you register and specify your areas of interest, you will be sent information about newly published material in your chosen field by e-mail.

  **Zetoc** provides access to the contents of approximately 20,000 current journals and 16,000 conference proceedings held at the British Library. It provides a service called Zetoc Alert, which will email you the table of contents of your chosen journals. You can also save searches and have any relevant citation containing your keywords emailed to you, as new issues are added to **Zetoc**.

  [http://zetoc.jisc.ac.uk/](http://zetoc.jisc.ac.uk/)

  **Zetoc** allows you to very quickly set up email notification for subject searches and table of contents alerts from specified journals.

- **Other Ways of Keeping Up to Date**

  See the following link at the library website for a range of other methods of keeping up to date:

  [http://library.nuigalway.ie/support/researchsupport/literaturereview/keeping-up-to-date/](http://library.nuigalway.ie/support/researchsupport/literaturereview/keeping-up-to-date/)
Bibliography

For further reading, we recommend the following books:

Library Shelf: 360.1072 AVE (Main Library) Also available as an e-book

Library Shelf:

Denzin, N.K. et al. (2011) The Sage handbook of qualitative research
Library Shelf: 001.42 SAG (Main Library)

Library Shelf: 658.83 DOM (Main Library)

Gibaldi, J. (2009) MLA handbook for writers of research papers
Library Shelf: 808.027 GIB (Main Library)

Holliday, A. (2007) Doing and writing qualitative research
Library Shelf: 001.4 HOL (Main Library)

Library Shelf: 300.72 HAR (Main, Medical and Nursing Libraries)

Library Shelf: 808.066 HAR (Main Library)

Library Shelf: 507.2 HUR (Main Library Science Reference)

MacLeod, Roderick A. (2005) Information sources in engineering
Library Shelf: 025.0662 INF (Main Library Science Reference)

Library Shelf 540.7 MAI (Main Library Science Reference)

Maslin-Prothero, S. (2010) Bailliere’s study skills for nurses and midwives
Library Shelf: 610.730715 BAI (Nursing Library)

Murray, Rowena (2016) How to write a thesis
Library Shelf: 808.042 MUR (Main Library)
Library Shelf: 808.02 THO (Main Library)

Library Shelf: 610.72 OGD (Main Library)

O’Malley, Thomas. (2001) *Sources of law: an introduction to legal research and writing*
Library Shelf 349.415 OMA (Main Library)

Schmidt, D. (2014) *Using the biological literature: a practical guide*
Library Shelf: 574.07 DAV (Main Library Science Reference)

Walliman, Nicholas S.R. (2011) *Your research project: a step-by-step guide for the first-time researcher*
Library Shelf: 808.02 WAL (Main Library)

Library Shelf: 808.066378 WAL (Main Library)