

Literature searching and evaluating sources

Welcome to this session on literature searching and evaluating sources, one of three sessions being delivered during Lent Term. I'm Liz Osman and I'm the college librarian.

Today, we're going to be looking at literature searching to help identify sources you want to use for your essays, dissertations and longer projects, and then spend a little time on how to assess whether a source is suitable to use.

So let's start with the literature search. When you're starting a dissertation or project, perhaps even before you've settled on the title, you will need to do a literature search. A well-planned literature search will ensure that the topic you choose is realistic. Your supervisor may steer you on this to some extent, but looking at what has already been written around the subject will also give you a good guide. There's no need to make life difficult for yourself from the start.

In order to show you have a good grasp of your topic, you will need to conduct your research methodically. If you set yourself a really broad topic, there will obviously be a lot more literature out there to sift through. It's very unlikely that you can read everything. So a bit later on you'll need to be discerning. But first of all, you need to cast your net as wide as possible to find everything that might be useful. Then you can filter it down. Knowing exactly what to search for can be tricky, randomly put in search terms into Discover or Google, as you think of them, is not the best strategy.

Think about your research topic. What question are you asking? If you don't quite know yet, what's your topic area? Break the research question or topic down into the key concepts that you'll need to search for. Think of different ways to express each concept, identify synonyms and variant spellings to make sure your search is as thorough as possible. Consider whether American or European researchers might use slightly different terms.

So, for example, topic: the impact of television advertising on children. Your research question: does television advertising have any influence on children's eating habits? You'll see that I put an asterisk or star at the end of 'teen'. In iDiscover and Google the asterisk is a wildcard character. What that means is a search for teen* will give you

results containing teen, but also teens, teenage, teenagers, etc. The asterisk can also be used in the middle of words, so won*s will bring back results for wonders and wondrous.

If your topic is likely to come across variant spellings, particularly British and American spellings, you can also use the question mark in a similar way to the asterisk. The question mark only replaces a single letter, but allows you to search, for instance, for organization spelt with an S or a Z.

On the blog you'll be able to find a worksheet that you can use to gather your thoughts before starting a search. Here is an image of it so that you get an idea.

At the start of your search, make a list like this worksheet and use the terms that you list to search the catalogue, Google, databases, wherever you need to search. Go through the list, methodically crossing off search terms when you've used them. You'll almost certainly come across new terms while you're reading, which you can add to the list. You may also want to note down any specific authors or journals that you're already aware of in your research area and definitely want to look at.

If you're getting too many irrelevant search results, you may need to refine your search. Think about whether the terms you are using may just be too general or used in other subject areas as well. On the other hand, if you're not getting many results or aren't getting any at all try removing keywords or choosing a more general term, and don't forget to check your spelling. And remember, there are more resources out there for you than books and journal articles. Use your search terms when searching newspaper reports or on databases, Google scholar on the internet.

More generally, depending on your topic, you may need to look quite widely. As well as the question mark and asterisk that I just mentioned, there are a few other really useful tools that you can use on Google, and iDiscover as well. They are known as Boolean Logic, but don't worry about the name. The important part is being able to use them. So from this list here, we have AND - so burger AND fries will only bring back results that contain both words.

Chicken NOT nuggets, will bring back results for chicken that don't contain the word nuggets.

Burger minus gherkin will similarly bring back results for burger, but not results also containing gherkin.

Using the inverted commas around Big Mac will bring back results that contain Big Mac as a phrase. So you could have a longer phrase and it would only bring back results that contain that phrase in that order altogether.

And then you have the star. So McDonald's Big* would then bring you back Big Mac, but also a Big Tasty or, well, I don't know the entire McDonald's menu, but hopefully you get the idea.

Once you've gathered results, you need to consider what to do with them. In most instances there's no way you can read everything on the list and some of it won't turn out to be relevant. So ask first, is it for an essay or for a dissertation? This will impact on how many sources you should look at. You then need to evaluate your sources. If you're unsure whether the book will be useful, try to take a look at an e-book where one is available. This will save you having to get hold of a physical copy book from a library.

Ask questions such as why was the book written? Was it to inform? To persuade? To entertain, to teach or to provide an overview of an area? Who published the book? Was it a university press, government, campaign group? Is the book well organized? Use the contents or index pages to indicate whether you are likely to find material you need? When was it published? Consider the date, if this is relevant to your subject. For things like English literature, history, theology, age may not be a barrier to good content, but for things like science subjects and law making sure you've got the most up to date information on the subject is key to a good piece of work. Has the book got a bibliography? If so, does it cover primary sources? If you find a good book that has a bibliography, don't forget to use that as another source for finding useful material. For what sort of audience is the book written? The general reader? For students, specialists, for researchers? Many of the same criteria apply to journal articles.

Now, iDiscover, will provide you with access to a massive number of articles using the filters available usually on the right hand side. Or if you're on a mobile device, you may have to get them from the bottom of the screen. You can limit your search results to peer reviewed journals to ensure you are reading good quality information evaluated by

academics. You can also use the filters to limit your search in a number of other ways, including date ranges and importantly, full text online, which indicates you can access the material without paying for it. If in doubt by please ask a librarian if you're trying to access it so you can avoid paying wherever possible. The university has already paid an enormous amount for you to have access to resources.

You'll also find in many subject areas that you can access useful databases. Your faculty librarians and supervisors will be able to give you guidance on which ones will be most useful. In some subjects, particularly the social sciences, you may need to find more current information than even journal articles can provide. Newspapers are a good source of recent information and current affairs. And you can find newspaper articles on iDiscover and also through the Lexis Nexis database. Please do bear in mind, of course, that newspapers often do have a political bias. So look at multiple sources where you can rather than relying on one.

Now, Google and Google scholar can be incredibly powerful tools for gathering together resources that might be useful for your literature search. What you need to recognize and compensate for is that Google and even Google scholar have no academic filters. They will bring you results, but with no indication really of how trustworthy, accurate or scholarly the contents are. There are some advanced tools you can use within Google to limit searches, you'll find them in the advanced search accessed from the settings link on the bottom right of Google's homepage. A particularly good one for some of you will be to limit the results to more specific website addresses using things such as the ac.uk and .edu for university sites or .gov and gov.uk for official government sites. .org sites are a little bit more complicated. They tend to signify charities or other non-profit organizations. But that doesn't mean the content isn't without heavy bias at times. And .org has been more widely used in recent years for all sorts of purposes.

So what can you do when faced with websites that you need to assess? A quick Google search is going to bring up a lot of results, but start off with some of the same questions you asked of a book. Why has the site been written? Who's written the text? Has it been updated recently or is it dormant site? And who's the target audience? A lot is going to depend on the subject of searching. Something like say homoeopathy will always bring up quite a lot of unbalanced information, and this particular website is clearly anti homeopathy, and you'll be able to find quite a lot on the other side. Finding those that sit

on the fence and assess it neutrally is a lot harder. However, searching something on modern Russian politics will also bring problems. In reality, most websites have an intentional or discreet bias. So really looking at a number of sites is advisable. This is going to be true for any even slightly contentious topic, whether that's political research, something like the discredited but continually perpetuated link between the MMR and autism, or even historical portrayals of prominent figures like Richard III. That's why it's so important to us why a Web page has been created in the first place.

And it's always worth clicking around a few pages of a site to understand their argument or confirm the neutrality. Is there is an about us or a page that might quickly provide you with the information? What else? Well, the design of a website, the quality of the design says nothing for the credibility of the content, and neither does the web address. Badly designed sites can host excellent information and vice versa.

One final thing to note with websites, statistics in particular are something to be wary of online, unless they're coming from an official website like Office of National Statistics. However, even then, keep a critical check as to how they may have been manipulated to show the best result. Or look for a website that clearly cites their sources and numbers. Wherever possible, try to locate the raw data from which the statistics have been derived so you can draw your own conclusions.

Now, that is an extremely brief tour through literature searching and assessing sources, but the college library team are happy to help you with guidance and tips, so please feel free to get in touch. Even whilst you may be off site, the library can be contacted by email and are ready and waiting to help you. You may also find that your faculty department has subject specific sessions for you, and I'd recommend those if you're about to engage on any longer piece of work. Thanks for listening. Please look out for the other two sessions that will be available in this study skill set.