

Introduction

Literature searching involves a systematic and methodical search of published sources of information to identify items relevant for a particular need. The “literature” involved may be in the form of books, journal articles, video material, conference papers, websites, reports, theses, patents, standards or other type of information source.

Why do a search?

- to help in topic selection - to assess a topic’s novelty, originality, feasibility
- to discover information that you can use in your actual project - it is vital to show that you have located, understood and assimilated previous work in the field
- to provide knowledge of the subject area in general, for background and contextual information - a search will give you awareness of the structure of information in a particular subject area
- to discover literature on basic research methods themselves – questionnaire design, data analysis, report writing skills etc.

Planning the search

1. Plan your information search. Spend a few minutes thinking about what you really want to find information about. This may involve breaking your topic down into several separate information searches.
2. Consider the following aspects of your search:
 - **Scope** - is the information you require a core element of your topic, is it background (a paragraph in your introduction), or tangential to your main approach?
 - **Timescale** - how far back is the information relevant? Must it be very recent? Published in the last 5 years? Or historical? If looking to forecast you may need to look back over a long period to assess statistical trends etc.
 - **Range** - do you need local (e.g. Edinburgh) information only? Regional? National or International? If a variety, assess the part each type will play in your project.Set yourself parameters or limits to the search if you can - but keep it flexible, as your strategy may change as the search develops.
3. Most importantly, select the **key concepts** your search will involve. From these concepts, generate a number of subject or **keywords**. These are the words you will actually look up in various information tools. To help you generate keywords, look through textbooks, encyclopaedias, handbooks etc., or scan some current issues of journals in the appropriate field. Brainstorming is an excellent way to identify keywords, especially in groups. Integrate new keywords discovered as your search progresses.

When choosing keywords, try to give your search some element of strategy. Think of **broad** terms that encompass your topic, **narrower** terms that are more specific, **related** terms that will enrich your search, and **synonyms** or **alternative** terms to make your search comprehensive. When thinking of synonyms, be aware of transatlantic terms that may be used, and check out each in the indexes you select.

4. Think about the type of information you are seeking. This may help you identify the most likely tools to use. Is it general theory (textbooks), current analysis and comment (newspapers and journals), names of contacts (directories), statistical, governmental, legal, technical, or biographical?

Doing the search

1. Consult library catalogues, general subject guides, bibliographies, etc. to establish which indexing tools, databases and internet gateways will be the most useful for your topic and search parameters. Use the library Subject Guides <http://libguides.napier.ac.uk>, or ask library staff for assistance in selecting the most appropriate tools.
2. Using the selected sources, search through the subject indexes to trace relevant articles. If you find new and relevant keywords, add them to your search. Locate as many references as possible on your topic. If you cannot find many, it may be that the keyword used is too narrow - broaden out your search using a more general term. If you find too many articles under the search term, try a more specific keyword. Use your synonyms, and amend your search in the light of experience. If you cannot find much at all, it may be that you are using an inappropriate index or database. Check the journals covered by the index or ask for help from library staff. See our Help Centre webpage, <http://my.napier.ac.uk/library/helpcentre> for details.
3. Be methodical and patient. Information searching can be frustrating, and there are times when you will either find too much or too little.
4. When you do find relevant articles, books, websites or other items, **note down the full bibliographic reference**. This will save you a great deal of frustration later on when you come to compile your bibliography. If you are doing an in-depth project or dissertation, you may wish to compile a database of your references, with a list of keywords describing the contents of the work. This can be compiled manually or on a computer. You may also wish to add your own notes, detailing how useful the article was, where you obtained it, which tool helped you locate it, etc.
5. Depending on the results, you may wish to extend your search by accessing information sources outside the university. This will probably begin by using external websites and library catalogues - try using our webpage <http://my.napier.ac.uk/Library/study-and-research/Pages/Other-libraries.aspx>
6. You may also wish to use other external information sources such as specialist libraries or information units, contacts etc. Before you do this, it is essential that you have a clear idea what you are looking for, and that your planning has been as thorough as possible, otherwise you will waste much time and effort and results will be variable.

Information Sources

Books, reports, DVDs etc. can be traced by looking at some of the booksellers' websites, e.g. Amazon, www.amazon.co.uk, Blackwells Online,

www.blackwell.co.uk, as well as catalogues of research libraries via the web. See our Online Bookshops and publishers web page, <http://my.napier.ac.uk/Library/study-and-research/Pages/Bookshops-andSuppliers.aspx> for further help on where to look.

Newspaper and journal articles are best located via LibrarySearch <http://librarysearch.napier.ac.uk>. Alternatively use the Databases link to search individual databases for your subject such as **ABI- Inform Global, PsycInfo, CINAHL etc. Nexis UK** is a huge database of international newspaper articles. See the Journals and databases sections of the most appropriate Subject Guides, <http://libguides.napier.ac.uk> for advice on the best services to use for your research.

Getting the information

1. Check LibrarySearch <http://librarysearch.napier.ac.uk> to see if books or journals are held in the library, either in print or online.
2. If a journal is not available, check SUNCAT for journals in other local libraries, www.suncat.ac.uk, and online catalogues of other Edinburgh Libraries for books, to see if you can read it locally. Other academic libraries require a SCONUL Access registration, apply via www.sconul.ac.uk/sconul-access. See our webpage on Finding Journals for more information: <http://my.napier.ac.uk/Library/getting-started/Pages/Find-a-specific-journal-orarticle.aspx>.
3. If the item is not held locally, and you really need it, fill in an Inter Library Loan request. <http://my.napier.ac.uk/Library/study-and-research/Pages/Inter-Library-Loan.aspx> We will attempt to borrow it from another library on your behalf. Journal articles will usually come quickly as electronic documents, but books may take 10 days or so, so ensure you submit requests in plenty of time.
4. Also use contacts and professional, trade, and scholarly associations to obtain other materials.

Further help

Much has been published to help students with research methods, study skills and literature searching - try these terms in LibrarySearch to find books on this area. LibrarySearch will also help trace published guides which detail literature searching in specific subject areas. In addition please see our Study Skills webpage <http://my.napier.ac.uk/Library/study-and-research/Pages/Study-Skills.aspx> which contains a number of useful web links to help you in writing essays and dissertations.