Literature Searching

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, videos, conference papers, websites, reports, theses, patents, standards or other types of information.

Why do a search?

- To help in topic selection - to assess a topic's novelty, originality and feasibility.
- To discover information 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 and subject reading list materials, or read some current issues of a journal 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 terms that may be used other countries (e.g. UK or US spelling).

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), statistical, governmental, legal, technical, or biographical?

Doing the search

1. Decide on your sources to search (see ideas at Sources to Search). For Edinburgh Napier resources, start at LibrarySearch. Use Library Subject Guides to find subject-specific databases and search tools.

2. Using the selected sources, search for 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 not using the best sources. Ask for help from library staff. See Help Centre.

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 time later on when you come to compile your bibliography. If you are doing an in-depth project or dissertation, you may wish to keep track of the items you find using reference management software. See our Reference Management LibGuide.

5. Depending on the results, you may wish to extend your search by accessing information sources outside the university. See Other Libraries.

Information Sources

See the Subject Guide for your subject area for advice on the best databases and sources to use for your research.

- LibrarySearch
- Databases – to search an individual database for your subject area. Nexis is a huge database of international newspaper articles.
- Google
- Google Scholar – see Google Scholar Libguide for how to link to ENU resources.

- Social media
- [Theses](#)
- [Other libraries](#)

Getting the information

1. Check [LibrarySearch](#) for to see if books or journals are held in Edinburgh Napier University Libraries, either in print or online.

2. If a journal is not available, check [Library Hub Discover](#) for journals in other local libraries, and online catalogues of other Edinburgh Libraries for books, to see if you can read it locally. To visit other academic libraries, you will need to register for [SCONUL Access](#).

3. If you can't find an item locally, make an [Inter Library Loan request](#). We will try to get a copy from another library on your behalf.

4. Use contacts and professional, trade, and scholarly associations to obtain other materials.

Further help

If you would like to read more, you can find books about research methods, study skills and literature searching in [LibrarySearch](#), some of them for specific subject areas.

Find further reading on our [Study Skills](#) webpages.