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Information Skills Audit for Research Postgraduates in the Arts Faculty

This is a quick guide to get you thinking about the range of information resources available and ways of improving your information-seeking skills.

If you would like more guidance on any of these issues, or on research tools and techniques which are specific to your discipline, please contact one of our research support librarians:

- Sarah Evans (s.evans@library.uq.edu.au) for the Schools of **Music** and **English, Media Studies & Art History**
- John East (j.east@library.uq.edu.au) for the **History, Classics and Religion** disciplines within the School of History, Philosophy, Religion & Classics; and the **European Languages** and **Linguistics** disciplines within the School of Languages & Comparative Cultural Studies
- Sue Lockeridge (s.lockeridge@library.uq.edu.au) for the **Philosophy** discipline within the School of History, Philosophy, Religion & Classics; and the **Applied Linguistics** and **Asian Languages** disciplines within the School of Languages & Comparative Cultural Studies

Chaining (the "Snowball" Method)

Even with all the sophisticated information resources available today, the most widely used technique is still the traditional process of finding one important reference on the topic, reading that, and following up the references that it cites. And those references will cite other references for you to investigate, and so it goes on.

This is an excellent way of familiarising yourself with the literature on the topic. It has one obvious disadvantage: **it can only take you backwards** to older publications on the topic. It cannot help you discover the new literature and the latest research.

Searching Databases

As more information becomes available electronically, it becomes easier to identify the resources that you need for your research. However we are still a long way from the point where all information is available electronically. Print (or manuscript) resources are still essential in most areas of the humanities.

But even to locate the print resources, increasingly you have to use some sort of database (such as a library catalogue). So you need to understand how to use databases: this is fundamental to finding information today.

See the UQ Library [*How-To Guide on Searching Databases*](#).

Controlled Vocabulary

To search databases effectively, it is important to understand the concept of **controlled vocabulary**.

Many databases use a system of standardised subject terms (sometimes called *descriptors* or *subject headings*). Using these terms may help you to find information that you would otherwise have missed.

So when you find a useful reference on a database, look at the full database record for that reference to see if there are any descriptors or subject headings in the record. Searching by those terms may yield useful results.

Cited-Reference Searching

Another way of improving your results is to search by **cited references**.

The principle is simple: if there is a book or article which is fundamental to your research topic, it may be helpful to find later publications which cite that book or article.

See the UQ Library [*How-To Guide on Cited Reference Searching*](#).

Full-Text Databases

There are now very large databases which provide the full text of millions of journal articles and books. How do you find relevant material in such large databases? Here are some tips.

Phrase searching: Many databases allow you to search for phrases. Often they use inverted commas to indicate a phrase search (e.g. "*feminist historiography*"). This means that you are only looking for references where the words occur side by side. This will often produce better results than searching for references that contain your search terms anywhere. The more specific the phrase is, the better.

Very specific terms: If possible, use very specific terms which are unique to your discipline. Examples: scripture references (*mark 5:25*), a standard abbreviation for a manuscript (*faustina b vi*) or an inscription (*cil i 200*).

Cited reference searching: See previous section

Using Library Catalogues

In most areas of the humanities, books are still the primary source of information. Library catalogues are the traditional way of locating books. But which catalogue do you use? And how do you search library catalogues effectively?

See the UQ Library [How-To Guide on Searching Library Catalogues](#).

Browsing the Library Shelves

This sounds like an unsophisticated way of finding information, but in fact it is still widely used by experienced researchers. Whenever you go to the shelves to borrow a book, scan the adjacent books as well.

Can you quickly assess the usefulness of a book from the contents list, the index and the bibliography?

Unfortunately it is getting harder to use this technique, partly because libraries have to send much of their older material into storage as a result of space constraints, and partly because new books are increasingly being purchased as e-books.

Booksellers

Researchers in the humanities spend a lot of time in bookshops, and they regard their **personal library** as one of their most useful resources.

Today, there are many "virtual" bookshops available on the web. While they may not allow you to skim through the books, their databases make it easy to identify a wealth of resources that you would not have found in a traditional bookshop. Many researchers now find sites like [Amazon](#) indispensable tools.

Publishers

When you have spent some time locating relevant books, you will probably find that a high proportion of those books are published by a small number of key publishers in your area.

Most of those publishers will have a website. Check these websites to find out about other books that the publisher has produced. Many of these websites will allow you to set up **alerts** so that you can be notified by email when new books are published.

Electronic Books

Electronic books (e-books) are not as comfortable to use as a printed book. But you can access them without coming to the library, you can search the text for specific words, and copying-and-pasting is a huge improvement on manual transcription.

See the UQ Library [How-To Guide on Electronic Books](#).

Book Reviews

Book reviews are an important resource in the humanities. They keep you up to date with new publications and new critical approaches in your discipline.

See the UQ Library [How-To Guide on Finding Book Reviews](#).

Finding Journal Articles

After books, journal articles are the most important source of information in most humanities disciplines.

We have already mentioned **full-text databases**. For journals, the most useful of these is [JSTOR](#). There are other useful full-text databases produced by major journal publishers. Many of these full-text resources are also indexed in [Google Scholar](#).

The full-text databases have the added advantage that you can **browse** through all issues of a journal. Traditionally, scholars located many of the journal articles that they used by browsing through long runs of journals on library shelves. This process is laborious, but for some types of research it is still the best way of locating relevant material. It is also a good way of keeping up with the new literature.

In most disciplines there is a major database that began life as a serially published printed bibliography. These **subject-specific databases** are essential tools, but they rarely contain the full text of the references, so they must be searched using a different approach, more akin to searching a library catalogue.

The subject-specific databases often include other types of material, such as books, dissertations and articles published in edited books.

To see all the databases that the Library subscribes to, click on the [Databases](#) link on the Library homepage and use the drop-down menu under *Browse by subject*.

Finding Newspaper Articles

Researchers used to spend years of their lives laboriously scanning through newspapers in their microfilm or print formats. In some cases, this is still the only option.

Fortunately, most recently published newspaper articles can be searched via the web, although not always for free. Increasingly, older newspapers are also being digitised and turned into searchable databases, some of which are subscription-only resources, while others are available free online.

See the UQ Library [How-To Guide on News and Newspapers](#).

Finding Theses

It is generally the case that the best theses eventually get published as books or journal articles. Nonetheless theses often contain useful information which has not (or not yet) been published elsewhere.

See the UQ Library [How-To Guide on Finding Theses](#).

Finding Web Resources

There is no easy way of navigating the wealth of resources now available on the web.

There are smarter ways of searching Google, by limiting your search to specific *domains* such as *.edu* or *.gov.au*. See the UQ Library [How-To Guide on Internet \(Web\) Searching](#).

You should be aware of how to access Google Scholar via the UQ Library's proxy server, so that you can access subscription-only resources more easily when using Google Scholar. If you are off campus, always access Google Scholar via the Library's Databases gateway or [this link](#).

Finding Unpublished Material

Unpublished source material is an essential resource for some research projects. It is also extremely difficult to locate and access.

For a general introduction to this very complex topic, see the UQ Library [How-To Guide on Manuscripts and Archives](#).

Keeping Up to Date

It is important to keep up to date with new publications in your field. Having done your literature search early in the course of your project, you will not want to repeat that whole process every six months to discover new publications.

Fortunately, many databases allow you to set up **alerts**. This means that you store a search on the database and it is run again at intervals, and the results are emailed to you. A number of library catalogues (including the UQ Library catalogue) offer this service.

You can also set up alerts from many journal websites (to receive contents lists of new issues) and publisher websites (to receive notification of new books in nominated subject areas).

Book reviews are another useful way of keeping up with the latest publications.

Document Delivery

Inevitably you will identify books and journals that you need which are not available in the UQ Library. Our [document delivery service](#) will try to obtain these for you.

An important part of developing your research proposal is assessing the feasibility of gaining access to the material that you will need for your research. Do **not** make the mistake of assuming that the Library can obtain anything and everything for you. Some material is not available for loan and too fragile (or too voluminous) to copy. Researchers sometimes have to travel to repositories elsewhere in Australia or overseas to study source materials.

People

People are important sources of information. Your supervisor, your librarian and your fellow students will all be able to provide assistance in different ways.

It is often helpful to make contact with researchers at other institutions who are working in the same area. Developing these contacts can be difficult, but blogs, discussion lists (listservs) and attendance at conferences can help.

Organising Your Information

When you have identified useful references, how will you store and organise them?

The library has a site licence for [EndNote](#), a software package that allows you to create a personal database of references. It includes facilities to store electronic copies of your references and to store your working notes on the references.

EndNote can also work with Microsoft Word to generate bibliographies in your thesis or other publications. However it has to be said that it struggles to cope with the complex footnote referencing styles which are often used in the humanities.