

# Research Basics

## *Information Search*

**Searching for information today is both easier and harder** than it was when your only choice was the Library. More information is available than ever before, and you can access information from anywhere around the world. Finding what you want requires more skill on the part of the student. The student needs to understand **where information is most likely to be found, how it's organized and how to retrieve it effectively** using computerized search tools.

## *Getting to Know your Library*

Find out early in your research what resources your library has, by visiting our college library. A library's **classification scheme** is a system by which books are organized and placed on the shelves. Browsing the shelves is an important step when you're trying to get ideas for your research project, so it's worth the effort to become familiar with your library's system.

A library catalogue is a listing of all the items held by the library. Most catalogues are searchable by title, author, subject and keyword.

**Consult your reference librarian for advice.** Reference librarians can save you a lot of time because they know their librarian collection very well. They are also skilled searchers, both of the library's catalogue and of online sources and the internet. In addition, they are trained to teach others to use these resources and are glad to do so.

## *Online Search Techniques*

To be successful at any kind of online searching, you need to know how computer searching works. The user needs to learn how to construct a good search strategy. There are many sources on the internet to help you learn search skills. Many of the concepts for using web search engines also apply to searching the online library catalogue. **Learn how search syntax works.** Search syntax is a set of rules describing how users can query the database being searched. Good syntax makes for a better search, one where the items retrieved are mostly relevant to the searcher's need and important items are not missed.

**Below are some tips:**

## Boolean logic

Learn about Boolean operators and how to use them from the MIT Library  
<https://libguides.mit.edu/c.php?g=175963&p=1158594>

## Full text of a document

Searching full text documents gives you a good chance of retrieving the document you want, provided you can think of some keywords and phrases which would have been included in the text. The problem is retrieving too many documents when you're looking for something in particular, because common words and concepts can appear in documents irrelevant to your topic. This is one of the problems with internet search engines which index the full text of web pages. The more skilled you can become in your use of search syntax, the greater will be your success in finding information in a full text database.

## *Search strategy: Finding specific information*

**Arrange a consultation with a reference librarian.** Once you've done your general reading/research in a subject area and have chosen a topic for your paper, you need to do some in-depth reading to look for a focus. You need to become informed about the topic. Find out what specific subject headings pertain to your topic, so you can search the library catalogue effectively.

**Ask the reference librarian how she would approach the subject** for your topic. Most reference librarians have done a lot of internet research or database searching and may have a good idea of how successful you'll be in researching your particular topic there.

**Consult a subject specific database on the library's website.** Now that you've found a specific topic, you can start your research in library databases subscribed by the college!

**Choose a search engine like *Google*.** Do a couple of quick, preliminary searches to test how easy or tough it's going to get quality information on your topic. Construct an appropriate search term or phrase and try it. Let *Google* search the whole internet and see how many hits you get, then quickly scan the first few pages of hits. Evaluate your quick searches. If you get many thousands of hits with the terms you used, and the first few pages of hits that are unrelated to your topic, then look at the advanced search features (consult librarian if you don't know how) to see if you can focus the search better.

**Redo the search until you've done the best you can.** Then start browsing the page of hits and following the interesting ones. Often if you can find at least one page that's on point to your topic, it will contain some links to other, similar pages, and you'll be off to a good start.

**Here are two videos you might find helpful in refining your topic and identifying key terms:**

[Video: From Question to Keyword](#)

A quick visual narrative that shows how research topics can be turned into keyword searches, from PATH, Lighting Your Way from Research to Writing Tutorial, Module 2, University at North Carolina Greensboro University Libraries.

[Video: Search Smarter](#)

This video from Oklahoma State University Low Library's "Inform Your Thinking" video series provides advice and context on how to target your searches based on your information need, and how to brainstorm good search terms for your topic.

Sometimes the most difficult part of finding information that is relevant to your interests is finding the right search terms. **And remember, often your very best searches come after several tries.** You learn more about what search terms to use after you examine search results from less useful searches. Use database subject terms, abstracts, and open web Google searches to help find more effective terms and synonyms.

### *Evaluating Resources*

From the Berkeley Library at the University of California, the questions on this page should help you explain why a particular source is a good fit for your research project.

<https://guides.lib.berkeley.edu/evaluating-resources>