

2.03 Research skills

Finding Reading Material

The first step towards a good literature review is a comprehensive literature search. You need to make sure you are getting a good range of the available literature in your area of study. Keep in mind as you are searching that the age of the material is relevant. The best method is to start from the most recent sources and work backwards. This also puts you in a better position to let good studies guide your reading. You can always go back and check that seminal reference everyone else quotes.

It is a good idea to get some help with your initial searching. The following resources will be of assistance to you:

Subject specialist librarians - Contact the librarian for your subject area for assistance in using library resources and with finding information and reading materials.

Apart from the catalogue, you should be thinking about other places to search for information. These include search engines for keyword and subject searches of the World Wide Web.

Don't forget to search the bibliographies and reference lists of the materials you read. These will give you pointers to more articles, and can also be a good guideline about how much you have read on your topic.

Finding things to read is the first step, but once you have your lists of references, it may be difficult to get hold of them. You will probably need to do some work to collect all the material you need. Travelling to other libraries, using the Inter-library Loan service and ordering articles from overseas are all options.

Checklist for finding materials

1. Identify keywords
2. Develop your search strategy
3. Search for Books - includes evaluating your search results
4. Search for Journal articles - includes online and print media
5. Search the Internet - includes evaluation
6. Cite your sources
7. Manage your bibliography

Keeping Track of Reading Materials

Because the nature of a literature review is to be dependent on what other authors have said, it is vital that you develop good referencing skills. These skills should be put into use the moment you first pick up a piece of written material. As soon as you pick up an article, put the publication details into your selected referencing system.

You may find it useful to list the material by content area. Make sure your bibliographic record also takes note of the call number of the book or journal and the library it came from. If you photocopied the material, make a note of what you copied and where you filed it. Avoiding duplication will save time and money.

Research material

GIVEN: Your search results... ASSESS: Quality of research sources against stated criteria.

Studying at University level, your research should be supported by information sources which are **authoritative and reliable**.

Search results may include a mixture of academic articles and books, popular books and newspapers or magazine articles and primary source documents. Are they relevant to your research? You should evaluate during:

- a catalogue or database search
- initial reading of an item
- a web search

Search results

GIVEN: Initial search results... ASSESS: Value of items against stated criteria.

Catalogue and database records contain information which indicates whether an item is likely to be useful. Remember that at this stage you are making decisions about the potential value of an item. You will re-evaluate items later, at the reading stage. Evaluate against the following criteria:

- Audience
- Relevance
- Currency
- Reliability

Audience - who is it intended for?

Read the summary. Does it sound relevant? Does the information suits your needs? Information that is directed at high school students may not be appropriate for a university essay. Equally, some academic work may be too advanced, specific or specialised for your needs.

Relevance - is the subject relevant?

Note the Subject descriptors and scan the Contents. Are they relevant? Are they central or peripheral to your topic? Are the subject headings the same as for other sources you have found useful?

Currency - is it up to date?

Note the Date. Are recent developments covered? Has it been updated (in the form of a new edition or update) to deal with changes in knowledge?

Reliability - is the author credible?

Who is the author? What are the author's credentials? What qualifications do they have for writing the piece? Are they backed by a reputable or traceable organisation? Who is the publisher? Information that does not conform to these criteria is not necessarily flawed or unreliable, but you should use it with caution.

Websites

GIVEN: Research material on the WWW... CHECK: That the material is authoritative and reliable

Internet resources should always be evaluated as authoritative and reliable sources - there are few restrictions (and no quality assurance) on published material on the web.

1. Author(s) - CHECKLIST:

- Are they associated with an institution or organisation in a relevant field?
- What are their credentials?
- Are they known as 'experts' in the field?

2. Title(s) - CHECKLIST:

- Does the title contain words that relate to your topic?
- Does it indicate how specific the item is?
- Is there a subtitle containing further information?

3. Revision date - CHECKLIST:

- Must the information you seek be recently published? If so...
- Check date of revision or update. (This may indicate that it is up to date with current research, but there is no guarantee that the date given is accurate.)

4. Site origin - CHECKLIST:

The site extensions in the URL indicate the responsible organisation's category, e.g.:

- **.edu** or **.ac** (academic institution)
e.g. The University of Melbourne: www.unimelb.edu.au

- **.gov** (government body)
e.g. The Victorian Government: www.vic.gov.au
- **.com** or **.co** (commercial body)
e.g. BHP Billiton plc: www.bhpbilliton.com
- **.org** (non-profit organizations)
e.g. Community Aid Abroad: www.caa.org.au
- **.net** (internet service providers)
e.g. VICNET: www.vicnet.net.au

It also indicates of the country of origin, e.g.

- Australian (.au),
- UK(.uk)
- USA(No country designation)

More extensions from VeriSign, <http://www.verisign.com/corporate/>

5. Evaluate Content

Initial reading

GIVEN: Items accessed following catalogue search... **ASSESS:** Value of items against stated criteria

Having assessed the potential value of an item during your searches, you should now re-evaluate materials during your initial reading (with the benefit of additional information). Re-visit the criteria covered during the search phase, by careful reading of the foreword, the bibliography, and any publisher's notes.

Evaluate against the following additional criteria:

- Scope
- Accuracy
- Objectivity

Scope - is the range appropriate?

- Does it have the detail you need?
- Does it supplement other sources you have read, rather than confirm information you already know?

Look at the range it covers - is it primary or secondary source material? **Primary** material contains new information or a new interpretation of previously known information. **Secondary** material is interpretation and comment on primary material by others.

If your essay is on a broad topic don't try to absorb every detail you can find. Start with an article from an encyclopedia or find a book that gives a general overview of your topic.

When you need detailed information an academic article is more likely to help you than a general overview.

Accuracy - a measure of reliability

- Can you check the information elsewhere?
- Are the sources of any facts clearly and correctly listed?
- Do you have faith in the spelling and other proof reading aspects of the work?

Key dates, facts and other figures should always be verified from alternative sources to ensure that they are correct. Check that they come from the source cited in the work. An incorrect citation may imply that the facts are not correct. While spelling and proof reading may seem trivial, consistent misspellings may mean that facts and figures are also typed or printed incorrectly. They may also imply that the information has not been thoroughly checked for inaccuracies.

Objectivity - more than one viewpoint

Most sources are subjective in some way. Good academic work considers all viewpoints and uses material from many sources to show a depth of research and consideration of all aspects of a question. Indicators of bias in information sources:

- Use of emotive or derogatory language
- Omissions in the information presented
- Contradictions to other material you have read

Viewpoints that seem extreme to you

You may disagree with some sources, but you need to show your familiarity with them, and demonstrate why you disagree with them.