Academic Skills and Development

Quick guide to

Literature Searching using Academic Databases

To access good quality academic material beyond that given on your reading list, you will need to carry out a literature search. Academic databases enable you to search multiple journals and other sources at once.

There are several steps to performing an effective literature search.

# Decide on a search topic

Formulate a question or hypothesis to define the topic.

For example, you wish to find information on the effect smoking has on children with asthma. Your question might be “What are the effects of passive smoking on children with asthma?”.

# Consider the keywords to use for your search

In the above example, the main keywords are: passive smoking, children, and asthma. Remember to think about:

* + **Related terms** - e.g. smoking habits, cigarette smoke, nicotine.
  + **Acronyms** - this is where your keywords can be condensed into a set of capital letters e.g. VAT or Value Added Tax - use both the full term and the acronym when searching.
  + **Alternative spellings** - include UK and US e.g. “color or colour”
  + **Possible changes of place names** - e.g. Peking to Beijing.

# Select a Database

You can access databases relevant to your subject via the library website and on your subject page. It is good practice to search more than one relevant database.

# Performing your search

Your search might look something like this:

“passive smoking” AND (asthma\* OR respirator\*) AND (child\* OR infant)

*How is this search constructed?*

The (AND, OR or NOT) are Boolean operators and combine search terms. A truncation character (\*) retrieves varying endings of your search term

e.g. Child\* will retrieve articles that include the words:

child, children, childcare, children’s, childhood.

Wildcard symbols replace letter(s) in a word. For example, organi**?**ation will find organisation or organization. Wildcards are very useful in dealing with spelling variations. Remember symbols used may vary between the different databases, always check the individual database ‘Help’ section.

Quotation marks keep words in a phrase together e.g. “duty of care”. The database will allow you to select the date-range you wish to search within, and where you would like your keywords to appear e.g. in the title, abstract or full-text.

# Evaluate your results and refine your search

The guide ‘Critical evaluation’ explains how to do this.

# Find out the availability of items at Surrey

While some databases contain full text articles others will require you to use the reference provided to search for the item elsewhere. You will need to check: is the item available from the library?

To do this, you can use SurreySearch for print and electronic items. Alternatively, from within the database, click ‘Check for Full Text’.

1. **Make a Resource Sharing Request to obtain items from other libraries** This is not generally required for undergraduate or Masters-level standard assignments. For dissertations or post-graduate research see advanced searching guide.

# Further advice

Learning Development Librarians are available at SPLASH drop-in sessions Monday-Friday, level 1 of the Library, or contact them via [splash@surrey.ac.uk](mailto:splash@surrey.ac.uk)

Further advice and larger text guides can be found online: [www.surrey.ac.uk/splash](http://www.surrey.ac.uk/splash)

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