Doing Library Research - Getting an Answer

Doing Research

When an instructor gives us an assignment, it’s important that we get together the information we need to complete it. The first thing to do of course is note the instructions, find what we must do in order to start the assignment off – for example, visit a company or construct a survey - and what kinds of outcome are required – which may include essays, reports or presentations.

We must then start collecting the information we need. There will perhaps be reference books recommended, or magazines and journals, or Internet sites; but when we check these set sources we often find there are gaps in our data. We will have to search for some key information ourselves!

To get the necessary information, we must determine:

1. What our specific topic is, what its key terms are
2. What kind of information is needed, what to search for
3. How we should search

1. The Topic & topic Keywords

To get useful information, it’s important to nail down and limit the topic. One step we can take here is to summarize the overall and specific keywords of the topic. For instance, if the wording of your assignment is “Discuss the social and economic factors which contribute to youth drug use in Melbourne”, then we can summarize this as:

Topic: drugs & youth, social & economic factors
Instruction: discuss
Limits: Melbourne

We can then brainstorm a list of content keywords (using our textbook or general reference book, if necessary). Keywords can be exact parallels (synonyms), or wider or narrower terms. For example:

Parallel terms: young addicts, teen users, teen addiction.
Wider terms: substance abuse, drug scene, poverty, broken homes, social cost of drug addiction, homeless teenagers, addiction, street kids, abused people.
Narrower terms: teenagers drug users of school age, abused teenagers.

2. What to Search for

Search Media - Materials/Sources to search

First it’s important to decide how much material, and of which sort, we should look for. If we need a general description of a topic area, then an encyclopedia such as World Book or Grolier will help; or we can use a library CD ROM encyclopedia. If we need to cite some recent topical event, then on-line newspaper files in the library will be the place to search.

We may need recent examples of food and beverage advertising, in which case current magazines should be our target (we can use a full text journal database, if we can’t find what we need on the library shelf). We may instead need the command set of a computer operating system such as UNIX, thus we would search the Internet for UNIX +manual.
Or, more commonly, we may need an in depth account of an aspect of a topic such as market segmentation or business logistic systems, in which case we need to look in appropriate books on the topic in question. For a general understanding in depth, books are always the place to begin!

**Search Objectives – Authorities, Fields of Study**

We must remember though that while books give us the best overview of a topic, they don’t necessarily give us the most up to date picture, unless published very recently. Being conscious of the date of publication of a book is most important, since ideas change, new concepts are developed, thus the overall shape of a field of study is a dynamic thing.

The idea of a ‘field of study’ is important when we’re researching something. Fields like youth work, hospitality, marketing, political science, sociology, etc., usually raise different issues and topics at different times, and often a few specific writers are the important authorities on a given topic. The names of these writers will often occur in published reference lists.

Becoming familiar with the changing issues of a field, and the names of the important writers, makes research much easier, though this knowledge doesn’t come at once. But being conscious that there will be an underlying structure in what you’re searching for gives you a general goal, which will make writing up your assignment topic more rewarding, and more efficient.

3. **How to Search**

Now we have some understanding of our topic and its keywords, and have decided what kind of material we’re looking for, we’re ready to start searching. Searching is something we get better at, though at first it can be frustrating. Basically it takes a bit of patience and persistence; though as well familiarity with search techniques and with library & Internet resources makes things easier. Remember also that face to face help is important: library staff are always happy to help; and most libraries have specific pamphlets to help us use their resources.

**Library Catalogues**

If your target is books, then a good place to start is a library catalogue computer (or in a World Wide Web public access library catalogue). Each library’s search interface is a little different, but you’ll soon learn the essential features each offers.

All library catalogues offer searches by author and title, and also by subject and keyword. ‘Keyword’ is perhaps the most useful: we use the topic & keywords we’ve already jotted down - and others we brainstorm while we’re searching - and use Keyword (or Keyword & Subject) searches to see what titles the library has in these areas.

**Wider searches:** are often useful to start with. One technique for wide searches is to use abbreviated search terms followed by ‘wildcard’ symbols such as ? or * to make the term more inclusive. For example, manag? will find all references to management & managers. (Do use the ‘Help’ screens of the catalogue to learn the useful symbols like ? or * which give wildcard searches, or ‘operational’ searches using +, / etc. !)

**Narrower searches:** are important, since this is the way to find the most relevant material. Typing “consumer” will find books in more than one field, whereas a string of words, such as “male consumer behavior”, should take us straight to titles in that specific area.

Sometimes we find something useful immediately. We type in “women’s consumer behavior”, and find a text titled *Consumer Behavior of Women in Australia in the 2000’s*. We can note the call number, go to the shelf; and we can read and summarize.

But often, especially in smaller libraries, we are not so fortunate. “Women’s consumer behavior” turns up exactly: nothing! What can we do? The first thing is not to feel frustrated or beaten, since what we now must do is to use other search strings which may find the resources we need.
So we go back to our list of possible search keywords: women consumers; market segmentation; consumer resistance; marketing for women; market segmentation; product placement. It would be unusual if there were nothing under any of these.

**Browsing the Shelves**

Books in reference libraries are arranged by call numbers, which follow a pattern of subject areas. Let’s say we have found some titles, but none of them look especially useful. Nevertheless, we note names and call numbers. Now we go to the appropriate shelf area.

At the shelves, we don’t just look for the titles we’ve listed. We skim along all shelves in the general area, scanning for possible titles, and pulling off the shelf any book which looks even vaguely useful.

We open each book we have taken, piling up appropriate looking books, and leaving those which are off our topic. Of course, we do specifically look for the books we’d previously noted, but we don’t restrict ourselves to these, looking into any hopefully titled book. (And don’t forget to look on sorting shelves or trolleys for recently returned books!)

**Internet (World Wide Web) Searching**

We have decided that we need a recent document on a particular topic. This is where the Internet can help us. Once again, we need to distinguish wide from narrow searches. Even more, since there is so much material on the Web, narrower searches are a virtual necessity!

Using search engines such as Google (http://www.google.com), or Dogpile (http://www.dogpile.com) or Altavista (http://www.altavista.com), typing search strings – not single words - is important. While each search engine uses its own mix of search methods, the essential technique is to narrow your search by using **AND**, **+**, so that while `<consumer behavior>` may in some engines find **all** references to `<consumers>` **or** `<behavior>`, `<consumer +behavior>` finds only pages containing **both** these terms.

Many catalogues and Internet search engines have **advanced search** areas. These also allow **AND** and **OR** searches, but more importantly they offer searches by a specified string such as “youth unemployment”. As with library catalogues, searching by a string is considerably more effective, since `<youth +unemployment>` may find documents which contain both keywords, **but at different points in the document**; and thus not be useful to us.

If it’s important note the source of printed information, it’s doubly important to check and note the sources of Internet material. Material published by governments or universities or similar institutions – such as industry bodies or special interest groups – is usually reliable; though it is best to double check from other sources if possible.

Along with books and magazines, all material from the Internet must be referenced in your Bibliography, though this can often be done by copying and pasting. As you search the Internet, it’s a good idea to have an ‘assignment notes’ document open on screen; and internet material can by copied – by Edit:Copy or by dragging the cursor – from ‘Web pages directly to your notes.

**Note taking & Referencing**

We take the books, magazines and documents we’ve assembled to a study area, and start to skim these in more detail, again rejecting materials that are off topic. Now we are usually left with three or four pieces of material only – though if we’re lucky there may be more.

As we look at reference material, we use the index at the back of books to search for key words from our topic, and use the table of contents of each book as a guide, too. We take outline notes, and collect useful quotations; and our minds should be positive and active! We keep asking “what would I expect to find here?”, and skim and scan for ideas, illustrations,
diagrams, tables of data, making photocopies where necessary.

This part of studying should not be like reading, where our mind is merely following the page, but more like mining! since we are actively skimming and scanning through references for information, ideas, and even more, for schematic pictures – we should be constantly asking ourselves, “what’s this really about, what does it ‘look like’?” A computer is a good aid here, since reports are best written ‘backwards’: the Reference or Bibliography section at the end being written first. And this is the time to begin, as soon as we start looking at references. (For help with citing references, and writing bibliographies, see the pamphlet Referencing & Bibliographies.)

Researching becomes Writing

Writing your Bibliography first is also useful since, as noted above, part of learning about a field is learning who the important writers in the area are. As we get familiar with the ‘names’, we can use bibliographies in the reference books themselves to search for further useful titles; and look at these in turn.

Along with opening a new file for the report we’re going to write, and entering useful book titles (and ‘Web addresses) in its Bibliography, the most economical way of note taking from our sources is to open a second file for ‘notes’ for the assignment; and in this file start outlining useful areas we find in the books we’ve got. An ‘assignment notes’ document is also where we can paste information from the Internet, as suggested above.

Although we haven’t started writing formally yet, we are jotting notes and assembling written material toward our finished project! Our research moves us into writing!

Bibliography


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