

Social Sciences: finding information for research projects

[ML-CR3]

Gathering relevant information is just one step in the research process. Exploring and selecting from the vast array of published information can be a time-consuming task, so it is important to know how to plan and carry out this work effectively. These notes cover the core information seeking skills and resources you need to do a literature search in your subject area.

Searching for information can be broken down into several basic steps:

1. **Defining your needs.**
2. **Selecting the most appropriate information sources.**
3. **Preparing a search strategy.**
4. **Carrying out the search systematically.**
5. **Recording your results.**
6. **Obtaining the documents you have identified.**

1. Defining your needs

When you are searching for information it is important to have a clear idea of your reasons for doing a literature search. Consider the number and type of references you really need, and whether currency and accessibility are critical. These factors determine your search pattern. Take into account the amount of time you have, not only for searching but also for reading.

You also need to analyse your enquiry and identify its different aspects. It is important to think of alternative words (like 'Northern Ireland' and 'Ulster') and spellings (like 'counselling' or 'counseling') that could be used as search terms. Even at the research level, this step can dramatically improve the success of your search. Examples and more detail are given in the handout [Database searching: a basic guide](#).

2. Selecting the most appropriate information sources

There is a large array of potentially useful information sources. Most of these are references to other articles or books rather than sets of information. There is no one source that is comprehensive, and the coverage and structure of each one varies. You need to be able to select the most appropriate source for each query. Some sources may be particularly convenient and might well be your first choice on most occasions. An awareness of alternatives is necessary when the result from your preferred source is not adequate.

Searching for journal articles

For nearly all topics you will need recent information from journal articles. Abstracts and indexes in electronic form offer a systematic and rapid way of searching journals. Both give full details of articles; abstracting systems also include summaries. Most of these [databases](#) are available over the campus network.

Some important social science databases are:

- [IBSS](#) via BIDS
This is the most important BIDS database on the network for social scientists. It is particularly strong in Sociology, Anthropology, Politics and Economics.
- [Web of Knowledge](#) via MIMAS
Despite its name, '*Web of Knowledge*' provides a full index service for all branches of academic research. Journals are indexed by the citations at the end of the articles and abstracts are provided. Searches can be done under author or title or journal title or keyword as well as by using the citation references.
- [PsycINFO](#)
PsycINFO, which used to be known as PsycLIT, is an excellent and inclusive database on the University network.
- [ASSIA](#)
is another excellent database. Its coverage only extends back to 1987 but its strong British bias makes it a database that is recommended.

Newspapers

All five of the major broadsheet British daily newspapers (Daily Telegraph, Guardian, Independent, Financial Times and Times) are available on the campus network at <http://www.shef.ac.uk/library/useful/newspape.html>. Normally, the newspapers are about 6 months out of date. If this coverage is inadequate, then copies of the daily newspapers are kept in the Main Library and there is also a considerable collection of newspapers on microfilm – a separate [guide](#) is available.

Electronic journals

There are 3 ways of checking to see if we can provide you with access to an electronic journal:

1. When you check the [Star](#) catalogue, electronic journals will have their holdings noted and there will be a red box, with a white cross, on which you can click to connect you to the electronic journal.
2. You can cross-check the [list](#) of electronic journals on the Library Website.
3. You will be given links to full text articles when you search the databases. Not all articles are linked and you **MUST** ensure that you have recorded your successful hits before you leave the database to read an article, otherwise your whole search will be lost.

SOCIAL SCIENCES DATABASES

You need to know about the coverage and organisation of each of the computerised databases so that you can decide which to use for a specific search. Normally, the Library provides printed guides to these resources and a summary of their strengths and weaknesses is given below:

- [Web of Knowledge](#) via MIMAS is convenient and current, it covers core social science journals, but has a pronounced US bias. Although the service is separated into 'Science', 'Social Science' and 'Humanities', it is essential to check the other databases as well as the obvious one. Health and Medicine are included as social sciences. It takes about an hour to become moderately effective at searching. There is a University of Sheffield Library [worksheet](#) to help you learn how to use the Citation Indexes on Web of Science.
- [IBSS](#) is the best networked information service for social scientists. It has a British bias because it is compiled from the stock of the British Library for Political and Economic Science. The index stretches back to 1950. There are 4 principal subject divisions: Anthropology, Economics, Politics and Sociology. **IBSS** indexes over 2600 social science journals, 30% of which are not in the English Language. There are also some books included in the index.
- The two education databases, [ERIC](#) and [British Education Index](#) provide references to the research process and methodology.
- [PsycINFO](#) has a wide journal coverage (from 1887 !!) with summaries, and it also indexes book chapters from 1987. Doctoral theses are also included on the database. It has good coverage of topics of interest to social scientists generally.
- An important general database is [ASSIA](#) which indexes articles on the applied social sciences. It has a strong British bias and is quite user-friendly. You are recommended to use the *Advanced Search* and take advantage of the *Thesaurus*. **ASSIA** has a built-in guide which is clear and straight forward.
- There are databases for medicine that psychologists and speech scientists will find valuable. [Ovid Online](#) contains the [MEDLINE](#) database and a smaller one for nursing, care and therapy called [CINAHL](#). The **BIOMED** service requires ATHENS registration. **BIOMED** links you directly to many of the articles that you find in your search.
- [EMBASE](#) uses the same software as **PsycINFO**. It covers many more European journals than **MEDLINE** does and is strong on the neurosciences.
- [Caredata](#) is a British service that has 25,000 references on community care. It also has a small international database together with a service that provides full-text access to Department of Health Circulars, Rowntree Foundation Findings and NISW Policy briefings.

- [EconLit](#) is an indexing service for economic literature and is very useful to Politics and Geography students as well as those in the School of Management.
- [Emerald reviews](#) indexes journal literature on range of management-related topics.
- [LISA](#) (Library and Information Science Abstracts) covers a wide range of information topics. It is a valuable source of information on the Internet, public sector management and on literacy as well as the fairly obvious library topics.
- [UKOP](#) (United Kingdom Official Publications) covers all British government documents since 1980 and a very large number of important publications from international organizations like UNESCO or the European Union.

Several of our databases use the same software and this helps those people who are learning to use databases. The software is called WebSPIRS and the Library has produced a [guide](#) (Guide NIS 63) that explains how to use it. Those databases, which might be of value to social scientists, that use it are:

- BIOSIS previews (formerly Biological abstracts)
- Books in print / Books out of print
- British nursing index
- EconLit
- EMBASE
- Film index international
- LISA
- Ulrich's international periodicals directory
- Modern Languages Association international bibliography
- Philosopher's index
- PsycINFO
- SPORT discuss

Theses and dissertations

There are database sources for U.K. and U.S.A. theses:

[Dissertations abstracts](#) - [\(NIS1\)](#). It is essentially American but does include a large number of European theses.

[Index to theses](#) - [\(NIS 58\)](#) This is available as a network service covering British and Irish theses from 1970-. For other periods you need to use the printed index at ABS 050 in the Main Library.

[Star](#), the Library's computer-based catalogue, has a separate theses catalogue of Sheffield University theses.

[REGARD](#) (<http://www.regard.ac.uk/>) is a research web site provided by the Economic and Social Research Council. It is of considerable value to post-graduate researchers because it not only lists research work in progress but provides in-depth information on completed research projects and the resulting publications and products.

Another innovation is the [Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations](#). This is

still a comparatively small database but there are several hundred digitised databases available from this site. The majority are American but several other nations have started to participate.

Books

You need to know how to find material in books held by the library. In some cases you will need reference books or research monographs. Keyword searching the **Star** catalogue is a useful skill for finding books. You can also search for books on a given subject by performing a classification number search.

The second stage is to look for books that are currently available from booksellers. There is a database called [Books in print](#) that covers all publications from the United States and publishers based there.

The last stage is to check the catalogues of other libraries. There really is no limit to this but the best four places are:

1. The British Library [Catalogue](http://blpc.bl.uk/) (<http://blpc.bl.uk/>). There are several million records here. Make sure you check both the Reference Collections (London) and the Document Supply Collections (Boston Spa).
2. The Library of Congress is the biggest and the best Library in the world. Its [Catalog](http://www.loc.gov/catalog/) (<http://www.loc.gov/catalog/>) contains 12 million records and information about books in other major American libraries.
3. Some of the largest academic libraries (University of Sheffield included) in the UK have compiled a joint catalogue called [COPAC](http://copac.ac.uk/) (<http://copac.ac.uk/>). There are about two dozen libraries in this consortium and this catalogue is obviously of greater value to the researcher because it is restricted to higher education libraries.
4. The HERO gateway provides a list of all the [University library catalogues](#) in the UK that you can log into.

3. Preparing a search strategy

You need to plan how to combine your search terms, and have a clear idea of alternative approaches in the event of finding too much, too little or nothing. It is also advisable to consider sensible limits to your search, such as how many references you will have time to read. Again there is more guidance on this in the handout [Database searching: a basic guide](#)

4. Carrying out the search systematically

An organised approach to the search can help you use your time effectively. There is a vast amount of literature on the social sciences and you need to be able to select the most relevant on each occasion. It is generally best to start your search in the most recent part of the source you have selected, and to work backwards from that. It is often helpful to look first for review papers which summarise information and provide a further

list of relevant references.

5. Recording your results

Keep a record of the sources and years you have searched. If you are carrying out searches over an extended period it may also be advisable to keep a record of successful search strategies so that they can be repeated.

6. Obtaining the documents you have identified

The sources you will use in order to find information will not tell you whether the journal is held by the Library. When you use **Star**, search for journals under 'Title' and click the 'Periodicals catalogue (SULOS)' box. The catalogue also gives you details of the stock of all the other major libraries in South Yorkshire.

Major abstracting services contain summaries of papers which can help you to decide whether you need the full text of the article. You can also use them to get summaries of papers traced through other indexes, like **IBSS**, that don't have them.

A. Finding journals in the Main Library

Our journals are organised so that you can find them using the class numbers given on **Star**. Guides and floor plans assist you in finding the right place. There is a special handout (ML-CR16) which gives further details.

B. Document Supply Service (Inter-library Loans)

You can get articles from journals or borrow books that are not stocked locally through our Document Supply Service.

It is worth repeating that the Library provides access to several thousand [electronic journals](#) and that it is essential to check our **electronic holdings** before you place an inter-lending request.

C. WARNING !!!

When you photocopy an article add the full details of journal, volume and date, otherwise you may not be able to identify it later on when you want to include in the reference list at the end of your work. Your examiner is likely to be familiar with important articles, and may well question any inaccuracies.

It is very important that you should remember that there is a legal limit to the amount you can photocopy from any particular book or journal and that, secondly, you are not permitted (by law) to make multiple copies of articles nor are you allowed to make them for distribution to anyone else. Check the [Copyright law](#) in the photocopying departments. Ignorance of the law is no defence.

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