Wolfson Academic Skills

Literature Reviews

At some point in your studies you will need to go beyond recommendations and conduct a literature search. It is worth spending some time thinking about what you need and where you will get it from in a strategic way; this will save you time and help you manage the sources you have consulted.

Search Strategies

When you don’t have a specific reference to help you find a relevant book or journal article, you need to conduct a literature search.

1. Define your information need: do you want one relevant result or everything ever published in a field? The answer to this question will shape where you look for resources and the type of search you conduct.

2. Articulate your search terms. Include:
   - synonyms e.g. survey OR questionnaire
   - alternative spellings. Wildcards are symbols that replace a letter e.g. colo*r finds colour and color
   - word stems. Truncation symbols allow for different endings e.g. educati* finds education, educating, educationalist
   - proximity e.g. qualitative n3 research, will find the search terms within 3 words of one another
   - inclusion e.g. juvenile AND courts

3. Compile a search string using a grid (see over).

4. Select your tools: are you after a book by a renowned author held in Wolfson library, a freely available government publication, an e-journal article you can view on your laptop in your room, or a thesis to find out the latest research? You may be able to use an overarching catalogue or database, or have to select a different one for each type of resource.

5. Evaluate your results: How many did you get? Do you need to broaden your search? Be more specific by adding additional search terms (use AND) or expand your search by giving alternatives (use OR). Limit them by country of origin, date or funder. Again, different databases will give you varying degrees of granularity.
Search string

Combine all these search terms to create a string to help you drill down to what is most relevant. Keep a record to ensure consistency across databases and so that you can record how you refine and change it depending on the results that you receive. This will stop you repeating searches and save time.

If you were asked to assess the social impact of nuclear power, you may devise a search strategy like this:

nuclear AND (soci* OR commun*)
AND (impact OR outcome* OR effect*) AND (power OR energy) AND NOT (weapon OR bomb OR proliferation)

Copy this grid and fill it in for your research question

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keyword Search Strategy Grid - add more columns or rows as necessary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your research question, thesis or chapter title:</td>
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<tr>
<td>[ ] OR [ ] OR [ ] OR [ ]</td>
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Finding related material

No search is perfect and it is likely that you’ll end up with too many or too few results. If you have found a really useful book or article there are several ways of using that item to find related material.

Browsing

When you find something that is relevant it makes sense to use it as a springboard and connect you to other related material. There are a number of ways to do this for books:

Browse the shelves—Books are arranged by classmark. This is a number that links similar material together. You’ll find it on the spine of the book and the numbers on the end of the bookcases tell you which classmarks are on those shelves.

Use author search—Scroll down to foot of the iDiscover record and look at the information under ‘Details’. Click on the author to find other works by the same person. If you start from the Advanced Search on iDiscover, you might want to add a keyword or date range to exclude authors with the same name.

Use subject headings in iDiscover—this is just like browsing the shelves. Each book is assigned subject headings on the item record. Click on these to find books on the same topic.

Citation searching

Databases such as Web of Science can give you a variety of citation options. You can follow up articles that have cited this article (and are indexed in Web of Science) as well as references in the bibliography. Many databases also make suggestions for related research: articles that share at least one or more references with the original. Some of these results will be in your original search, but many won’t because they don’t share your search terms (keyword or title, depending on what you searched for originally).

Google Scholar is well known for linking to the most citations because it indexes so many books, articles and other forms of scholarly communication. If you use it for searching, set up Library Links from the Settings menu so that it shows you links to material subscribed to by the University.