Safari

Section 4: Searching for information

The Safari website has now been updated to provide links to more up-to-date information and activities on digital and information literacy.

This document contains the original content of the website. Please note that this is several years old and only provided here as a reference. Some of the material may be out-of-date.

This document will not be updated. At the time of publication, all links were checked and working.

For more up-to-date material, please refer to the OU Library Being digital website.

Being digital is a collection of short, easy to follow activities. They cover the skills we all need to be effective online, whether it’s searching efficiently, critically evaluating information, communicating and sharing online, or selecting the right online tool for your needs.

Being digital can help you develop essential skills for study, work and lifelong learning.
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Topic 1: Introduction

This section should help you to:

- identify some of the search features that different tools have in common;
- apply techniques such as 'phrase searching' and 'combining search terms' to different tools;
- understand some of the different ways of finding information on the World Wide Web.

In this section you will learn how to translate your search statement into the language of databases. We will look at the basic principles of searching, which apply whether you are searching databases, library catalogues or the Web. You will practise these techniques before being introduced to the specific databases in your subject area.

**NB** – This is a very practical section – you will be practising search techniques in real databases and catalogues. Most of these resources can be accessed using your OUCU but occasionally it will be necessary to get a password – you can find out more from the Open University Library pages.

Some activities will require you to use paper and pen to make notes or record your thoughts.

If you do all the activities in this section, you might need to allow between two and three hours to complete it.
Topic 2: Basic principles

Whether you are searching a library catalogue or a specialist bibliographic database, many of the same principles apply. Each source that you use will probably look quite different from the one you tried before, but you'll notice that there are always features that are similar – a box to type your search terms in, for instance, or a clickable help button. Different databases refer to the same functions using different terminology, but the principles behind them are exactly the same. The trick is to check the clues given on the screen or in the ‘help’ of the individual database you are using.

OU Library resources

You can access a range of resources including databases, journals and ebooks from:

Selected resources for your study

Publicly available (if you are not an OU student)
Features of databases

In this topic, we look at some of the features that you may come across when you use databases. Here is a list of features to look for when you use a database for the first time (NB When you get to the next topic you will find a printable version of this list, with two extra questions, so there is no need to copy the list on this page.)

Some of the answers to the questions below might be made obvious by what you can see on the screen when you get to the front page of the database, but sometimes you will have to look at the online help (if there is any), to assist you. You might not get answers to all the questions you have, but the available answers will help you get to grips generally with how any database works.

Database checklist

- Is there any on-line help?
- Can I do a simple search?
- Can I look at the information in both short and detailed form?
- Can I choose where in the record I want my search terms to be found?
- Can I search for phrases?
- Can I combine search terms?
- Can I use truncation?
- Can I use wildcards?
- Can I do an advanced search?
- Can I get a list of what I’ve found?
Reflection: Turning your search statement into a search.

Imagine we are trying to investigate this search statement:

‘I want to find out about the environment or environmental – impact, effect or consequence of – GM or genetically modified crop or crops.’

How might we amend this statement so that we can enter it into the search facility of a database? Make some notes and read the discussion to see how we went about doing this.

Discussion

‘I want to find out about the environment or environmental – impact, effect or consequence of – GM or genetically modified crop or crops.’

- First of all we would take out the ‘I want to find’ – we wouldn't type that into a database.
- We might try ‘crop/crops’ and ‘environment/environmental’ with truncation. This is usually done with the use of an asterisk (*) so that word extensions can be included in a search. For example by using environment* we might get words that we hadn't thought of previously, such as environmentalists.
- We would probably try ‘genetically modified’ as a phrase because it is quite specific and will help to narrow our search down.
- Because we’ve used alternative terms – ‘impact’, ‘effect’, ‘consequence’ – we will need to use OR to broaden our search.
- Finally we will need to use AND to bring the search together – we are looking for records which are about the environment as well as about the impact, and as well as about GM crops.
If we were to write this search out in full using the language of databases it might look something like:

```
environment* AND impact OR effect OR consequence AND GM OR "genetically modified" AND crop*
```

In order for the search to work properly in some databases you would need to separate each set of search terms with brackets, to make sure that the database processed the right search terms together, and in the right order. For example:

```
(environment*) AND (impact OR effect OR consequence) AND (GM OR "genetically modified") AND crop*
```

In most databases these days, however, you will be able to enter the groups of search terms in separate boxes, which do the same job as brackets.

You would only need to carry out a search as thorough as this if you were doing an extensive piece of research. This is quite a complicated search and some smaller databases might not be able to process it. You would probably only need to combine a couple of the search terms to get some relevant results, e.g. environment AND effect AND "genetically modified". It is perfectly acceptable to alter the search, adding words, or taking words away: you can keep testing it until you find the results you are looking for.
Topic 3: Databases

In this section, we will be encouraging you to explore databases using the database checklist, and to search for articles in your subject area.

Activity: Databases in your subject area

Find and access a database in your subject area. You can use the following resources on the Library website to help you.

Databases

Selected resources for your study

Use the checklist to familiarise yourself with conducting searches using that database

Database checklist

- Is there any on-line help?
- Can I do a simple search?
- Can I look at the information in both short and detailed form?
- Can I choose where in the record I want my search terms to be found?
- Can I search for phrases?
- Can I combine search terms?
- Can I use truncation?
- Can I use wildcards?
- Can I do an advanced search?
- Can I get a list of what I’ve found?

Once you are confident using the database, try searching for articles on topics that interest you.
Topic 4: Library catalogues

Many of the skills you use to search databases can also be used to help you search library catalogues.

Having said this, library catalogues are distinct from databases. This topic will introduce you to using them confidently to find the information you need. By the time you have reached the end of the topic you will be able to:

- recognise different search options;
- search a library catalogue effectively;
- look at an individual item record and find the information you need;
- mark, or record, the results of your search.

NB: If you plan to complete all the activities in this topic you will need to allow up to 1 hour to finish everything. Some activities will require you to use a paper and pen to make notes or record your thoughts.
Activity: Recognising different search options

When you look at the catalogues of different libraries they may appear to differ greatly from one another. However, there are several key features that appear in most library catalogues. Have a look at these different catalogues – click on the links below to access three different catalogues. Make some notes on the common features you can see. When you have noted all that you can find, read the discussion below to see what we found.

COPAC search

British Library Integrated Catalogue

Library search

Discussion

The features we identified were:

- help function,
- search box to type in,
- searching by author or title,
- search button.

There are other features that are common to some but not all library catalogues. Look out for different search options such as ‘easy’, ‘advanced’, ‘keyword’, ‘subject’, ‘author’, ‘author/title’, ‘periodical’, ‘journal’. Also look out for links to other libraries, or to electronic or online resources, and options covering your use of the library: for example, ‘my record’, ‘borrower information’, ‘reserve’ or ‘request’.
How to search a library catalogue

Take some time to become familiar using **Library Search**. Practice changing the search options. Try looking for materials related to your studies. Do you need to look for a particular book or journal? Or, are you looking generally for a subject area?

**Looking for a particular item**

Perhaps you would like to find some recommended reading or a set text. If so, look for a ‘title’ search, a ‘keyword title’ search or a ‘quick author/title’ search. These searches are designed to find specific items and should be the quickest option. If these options do not find the book that you are looking for perhaps it is worth thinking about trying a subject search.

**Looking for a subject**

You may have been unsuccessful looking for a particular item or perhaps you are interested in finding out about any resources in the library that deal with a certain subject. Look for ‘subject’ searches. These will often take you to a long list of subjects that you can browse through. Another approach to subject searching is to think of one or two key words or concepts and try a ‘keyword’ search. This may not be as exhaustive as a ‘subject’ search but it can sometimes be quicker.
Scenario

Mary is a student on a Science post-graduate module doing research on genetically modified food. She lives in the county of Hampshire in the UK and she thought that her local public library service might be a good place to look for material. She was not sure whether she could search the catalogue from home and so she checked on the Open University Library website for information about public libraries. From here she found a link to Hampshire County Council and a place to search their catalogue, online from home. Some of Mary's module material had mentioned a useful book called ‘Genetically modified food’, edited by Craig Donnellan so she thought that she might search for this item first.

Activity: Which search option would you choose?

Look at the [HCC library catalogue](#) and decide which search option(s) you would use if you were looking for the book called ‘Genetically modified food’, edited by Craig Donnellan which Mary is searching for. When you have finished your search look at the discussion below for details of how Mary got on.

Discussion

Mary did a ‘title search’ for ‘genetically modified food’. There were several books with that title but she discounted the ones that were ‘children's’ and found that the one edited by Craig Donnellan was in the first few results. She could have decided that the keyword or author types of search might have worked too. Pleased that she had found the first book, Mary thought that she might use the catalogue to see if there were any other books on the same subject. How else might she look for other books on genetically modified food in this catalogue? She used the Advanced Search option to search ‘for ‘genetically modified food’ ‘Anywhere’ in the record, and found twelve records in the catalogue.
Activity: Keyword searching

Go back to the OU Library catalogue and try a keyword search related to your own study topic.

How to refine your search

Sometimes when you are using Library Search you will not get the results (sometimes called ‘hits’) that you were expecting. You may not get as many as you were expecting or you may get too many. At this point you could refine your search. If you have too few results, can you ‘go back’ and search for a broader subject area? For example if ‘criminal psychology’ did not produce many results try ‘psychology’. If you have too many results, see if you can ‘go back’ a step and add another keyword. Or perhaps ‘limit’ your search in some way for example, by date – try looking for items published in the last ten years.

There are other ways to refine searches using library catalogues. You may be able to use Boolean searching, i.e. (AND, OR & NOT, phrase searching and truncation.
What to look for on an individual item record

When you are using a library catalogue you will often need to find out more information about a particular item. Not all library catalogues will show the same level of detail for individual items but there are some features that will be common to most library catalogues. There will be information about the item itself: author, title, editor, edition, publisher, ISBN. There will also be information about where to find the item in the library: classmark (shelfmark, class number, classification number) library site/location, and whether the book is in the library or ‘out on loan’ to someone else.

How to mark or record the results of your search

You may like to keep a record of the items that you have identified on the library catalogue. You can use this record to refer to when you are looking for items in the library. One way of keeping a record is to write down the information as you are searching. However, many catalogues now offer the option of ‘marking’ useful items and then either printing them out, e-mailing them, or exporting them to software that manages references.
Summing up

Although on the surface individual library catalogues may look very different from one another, there are many elements that appear in all (or at least most) of them. When using a library catalogue for the first time, remember to consider the questions in the checklist below.

Library catalogue checklist

- Is there any on-line help?
- Are there several different search options?
- How do I search for an individual item?
- How do I search for a subject?
- Can I refine my search (e.g. by adding extra terms or by defining limits)?
- How do I display an individual item record
- Can I mark/record the results of my search?
- How do I use my personal library record (e.g. to reserve items or to see what I have 'on loan')?
Topic 5: World Wide Web

This topic will help you to identify the kinds of information that are to be found on the Internet and understand the different techniques that can be useful when searching for web resources.

Most of us use the web on a daily basis for email, or for internet banking, or maybe for paying bills, finding sports results or cinema listings – it has quickly become a part of everyday life. However, given that it is a massive repository of information, how many of us have thought about how we can make the most of all that is there? We may use the expression ‘Google it!’ but if we do actually do that we may find ourselves swamped with thousands of results that aren’t quite what we need. How can we find our way through to what we really want? All the search skills we have learned so far can help on the web, especially those you practiced searching catalogues and databases. There are other techniques too and we will look at them over the next few pages.
What is out there?

It is hard to describe all the different kinds of information to be found on the Internet – and within it, the World Wide Web – because information there takes many different forms. These include text, audio and video. They are presented in hundreds of different languages by all sorts of people and organisations in a space where no-one has overall control. This makes it difficult to navigate all the available material, to find what one wants, and then to judge its real value.

Before we look at how to find what we want let's explore a little how the World Wide Web is structured. We can do this as we look at one simple way of finding what you are looking for on the web – starting from a site that you already know is useful to you. For example, try the [main Open University Library page](#) which has links to information and resources.

These opening pages are known as home pages and are a bit like the introduction and contents or index pages of a book. They usually give you some information about the content of the site and there may be a link named something like ‘useful links’ which will take you to other related sites in other parts of the web. Other home pages will be ‘gateways’ – mainly links to other resources.
Finding your way around the World Wide Web

Clicking on any link on a web page sends a request to the server that holds that information, asking it to send it to your screen. The link might be a heading; underlined or different coloured text; an image, or a drop down menu – you will know which because as you move the cursor over the link a small hand shape will appear to indicate it is a link.

Following the links that are presented to you on the screen is called 'browsing'. You use the contents of the page on the screen to guide you to find other pages you want.

Another quick way of accessing web pages is using the URL (Uniform Resource Locator) of the page you want to look at. Type the URL (also sometimes called the web address) into the location/address box of your browser, press return/enter, and the site should appear on screen. Each page on the internet has a unique URL and it provides lots of information. Look on the next page to see how this works.
Making URLs work for you

Each page on the web has a unique address, rather like a postcode. 'Locator' is the important word in Uniform Resource Locator ('URL') since it can give you clues to whereabouts you are within a site (are you on the home page or are you further in?), what you are looking at, and where the information you are looking at has come from (is the information from an academic institution or a commercial company?). Not only that, but if you understand the anatomy of a URL, you can use the principles to ‘guess’ what a company or organisation's web address might be. All websites follow a set pattern known as the Domain Name System (DNS), and usually take the form:

```
method://www.name.domain.country
```

![Figure 1: The Domain Name System (DNS)](image)

The image above shows the web address for the BBC.
From this image, we can find out that:

- http:// – This defines the **method**, and tells us that we will be looking at a website; http stands for hypertext transfer protocol – the ‘protocol’ or set of rules used by the computer to access and deliver web pages.

- www.bbc – This tells us the name, and informs us that we will be looking at a website held on a computer (also called a ‘server’) known as www.bbc – this part of the address tells you about the computer that the information you are looking at is located on; often it will be the name of a company or organisation.

- co.uk – we will be looking at the website of a company (‘co’) which calls itself ‘bbc’, in the UK. The co part of the address is called the **domain**. Examples of other domains you may come across include .edu or .ac – academic or educational servers; .co, .com – commercial; .gov – government; .org – non-governmental, non-profit making organisations. These might be followed with a **country code**, such as .uk, .au (for Australia), or .fr (for France) which can indicate where the computer holding the site is located.

For sites beyond the home page of an organisation, the usual form of the web address is as follows:

```
method://www.name.domain.country/pathname/document name
```

An example of this is the following web address:

```
http://www.doh.gov.uk/genetics/acgt.htm
```
Figure 2: Extended URLs

Here, the method is ‘http’, the name is ‘doh’, the domain is ‘gov’, the country is ‘UK’, the pathname is ‘genetics’ and the document name is ‘acgt.htm’.

The pathname refers to the directory or file where the information is to be found. In this instance the document name is acgt.htm, and it is stored within a directory called genetics on a machine belonging to an organisation called DOH (actually the Department of Health). The longer a web address is, the further away from the home page it is.

Activity: Unpicking URLs

What information can you glean from this URL?

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/civil_war_revolution/gunpowder_haynes_01.shtml
Discussion

From this URL you can tell that the document is called gunpowder_haynes_01.shtml (if you follow the link you will find it is by an author called Haynes writing about the Gunpowder Plot) and is contained within a directory called Civil War and Revolution, which is contained within a directory called British, which is contained within a directory called history, on a computer belonging to the BBC which is a company in the UK! .shtml, incidentally, refers to the software program and language used to create the document.

A small word of caution: unpicking URLs is not an exact science. Sometimes the way that different web authors and organisations structure their electronic information and web pages varies and you may find that guessing along the lines of the above model doesn't work. In such a case using a search engine like Google is probably the best way to find what you need.

Naming conventions are also slightly different in different countries and some international organisations use multiple URLs to lead you to the same site. For example .co and .com may lead to the same place – or may not. Education establishments may be called .edu or edu.plus a country marker e.g. http://www.usq.edu.au is the University of Southern Queensland in Australia, but in the UK a university will probably end with .ac.uk, like http://www.open.ac.uk. Often a little guesswork helps!
Using internet search engines – in general

Googling’ is now a word that most people will recognise but what does it really mean? The basic Google search involves deciding on a word or phrase related to the topic you are interested in, typing it into the search box for Google and then waiting to see what appears. If you have put in a complicated phrase or obscure word then you may only get a few responses or, more likely, you will get millions of results. Google is not the only search engine that is useful in this way. Others include Yahoo and Ask Jeeves. A comparison of the features of each of these is available from the University of California – Berkeley Library website. There is also information on that site about ‘meta’ search engines which are not databases in their own right but search services that access several other databases to collect their results.

Whichever search engine(s) you use, and as we have seen for databases and catalogues, success in searching depends a lot on what information you can offer the search facility. Refining your search terms will help. On most web search engines you can use the ‘refine’ or ‘advanced’ search to limit the number of ‘hits’ for any particular search. We will look further at how to do this later.

The best way to find out how web search tools work is to try searching!
Activity: Category searching

Some search engines offer the opportunity to search particular types of resource – look on the Google home page and experiment with looking for a search term under ‘images’ on then in ‘news’ and see what results you get. Make a note of the different categories you can search under – this may be useful to you later in your studies.

Activity: Searching accurately

Some search words you may wish to use may have different meanings and uses in different contexts. This may cause confusion when searching text resources and make it more difficult to get the results you want. Try searching for ‘birds’ on Google and see what happens. Google recognises that the word is used in many different contexts and if you scroll down the page you will see that you are offered a range of possible related searches to refine your results, e.g. types of birds, pet birds, and bird facts. If this grouping doesn't happen and you are still getting too many unsuitable links then you need to think carefully about exactly which words you use for your search terms and make use of ‘advanced’ search to limit the number of hits further. When using “genetically modified foods”, the following suggestions were given:

- genetically modified food examples
- genetically modified food facts
- genetically modified food advantages and disadvantages
- genetically modified food pros and cons
- genetically modified food for and against
- genetically modified food list
- what is genetically modified food
Other kinds of internet-based information: Open or not?

Much internet information is open for access to anyone who finds it, but some is controlled by particular publishers or organisations that review content and provide quality control. For example, many print journals are now also available via the internet. This kind of access is only available to those institutions and individuals who have subscribed to the publisher’s services. For OU students this means that you need to access these sites via the OU Library Resources website, which acts as a gateway. Students from other universities will need to use library links from their ‘home’ university; other users may need to pay online for access.

Increasingly institutions and universities are subscribing to the Open Access movement which, by using the internet, aims to make public the outputs of research and scholarship as soon as they are available, regardless of whether or not they have been/will be published in traditional ways.
Other peoples’ internet-based information

We started off this topic by suggesting that the links out from a web page that you already find useful would be a good starting point for finding other useful sites on the internet. Don't forget too that there is another rich source of ‘known’ material – all those pages identified by others and saved in online bookmarking accounts. These resources have already been pre-selected as potentially useful by others who have subject tagged them. This may save you some sorting time.

‘Invisible’ internet-based information

The web pages that can be accessed by search engines like Google, Ask Jeeves etc. represent only a fraction of the pages stored on the internet. The reasons for this are complex (you can learn more from the University of California at Berkeley) but the most important from the point of view of a student or researcher is that search engines cannot click buttons or type. This sounds obvious but it is important because it means that if access to a resource requires any kind of action e.g. “click here” or “enter password” a search engine will be unable to move forward and will have to ignore the resource. If your studies require you to use databases or journals to which you subscribe it is quite likely your favourite search engine (however good) will not be able to find documents located there.
Topic 6: Tracking progress

In this section we have looked at the wide variety of resources on offer which you can use to find information – search engines, gateways, databases and library catalogues. We have seen just how much information is waiting to be found; now we need to decide how we will keep track of our explorations.

However big or small the project you are doing, whether it’s for personal interest or as part of a programme of study, it’s a good idea to keep a list of which resources you plan to use, where you’re going to look for information and what you’re going to look for. This will help you plan how you will carry out your investigation. If you also record the results of your investigations this will make writing up your results easier too.

You will probably want to keep some sort of diary, journal or log book to track the progress of your thinking and learning. In the diary you may want to record details of:

- Places you have looked or need to look
- Useful search terms
- Contacts who can help you with one aspect or another of your work
- Decisions you are making as you go along e.g. when particular bits of information have caused you to shift your thinking
- Things that didn’t work out e.g. search terms that were too broad.

Let’s look at the research log of one student, Sarah.
Scenario

Sarah has just finished her PhD – this is what she said when asked about how she kept track of what she'd done:

"Keeping track of your research is a bit different for scientists – because we have to record every experiment we do in our lab books, and I had a field notebook too for when I was out on field trips, doing experiments. Deciding where you're going to look is really important. I kept a list of scientists elsewhere I wanted to talk to, a checklist of databases to search, my original search strategy and the various incarnations it went through. I also kept my notes of meetings with my supervisor so they were all in one place when it came to following up his advice."

Sarah was doing a PhD – a research degree over three years – and so had quite complicated needs. You will probably find that you can manage with something a little simpler.
This Research Diary is a sample from some research that we have done.

| Keywords | distance education OR 
|          | distance learning 
|          | + library + Australia 
| Databases | Eric & BEI > 27 hits 
|          | Left out library keywords 
|          | Ltd To 1996- Abstracts in 
|          | * send article by Bruce to Gill yellow file 
|          | * Check lib Catalogue for Wilson book 
|          | USA lib & Info science > 15/9 
|          | Ltd To 1996- 
|          | Too many hits - added in ‘information skills to narrow’ 
|          | Hits 
|          | * Article by lecturer at Edith C. Uni.
|          | check for email address and contact...? 
|          | CREE (Soc. Sci.) to do 
|          | google 
| Web search | Google 15/9 
| Australia, libraries, distance education 
| 1st 20 on bookmarks file ‘Australia’ 
| * Check later 
| * Check education web pages - link to library 
| Homepage worldwide somewhere? 

Figure 3: Sarah’s research diary. For a text alternative, please see Appendix 1

On the other hand you may prefer something more visual. One option is mind mapping. To see a variety of mind maps go to Google, click on the ‘Images’ search option and enter ‘mind mapping+ (name of your subject of study or interest)’ (don’t include the brackets). You should find plenty of inspiration.
Other tracking tools

There are two other kinds of study resources that you will probably want to track; references to journal articles and books, and web–based resources of all sorts. Although you can record these in your learning journal or log, there are good reasons why you might prefer to do so online, or on your own computer.

**Bibliographic software** enables you to store your references electronically. It also allows you to automatically generate bibliographies and reference lists in a variety of styles in seconds.

**Social bookmarking** enables you to store Web addresses on the internet and access them from any computer with a connection to the Internet. There are a number of free services which allow you to do this. You will be asked to ‘tag’ your addresses with a word, or words, so that these words can be used as search terms to help you re–find and re–organise resources on the same topic. Some popular ones are Delicious and Diigo. You can save images and photos at Flickr.
Topic 7: Your subject

Having looked at a variety of different sources, such as library catalogues, databases and the web, and thought about ways of keeping track of what you find when carrying out a search for information, to draw it all together, you should look at databases, library catalogues and internet resources that are the most relevant to your area of interest.

We know that, although there are common sources/elements to all subject areas, the shape of each subject's literature is not identical. Many subject areas have information sources that are unique or at least uniquely important, e.g. pictures in the study of the history of art.
Topic 8: Summary

In this section we have introduced the basic principles of searching, and applied them to different tools, such as databases for finding references to journal articles, and library catalogues. We have also looked at the tools for finding information on the web. Finally, we considered the things we would need to record to keep track of our progress when searching for information.

Activity: Reflection

Thinking back to what we have covered in this section, note down:

- any problems you have met with so far;
- any things that have given you a sense of achievement;
- anything that you will do differently next time.
Appendix 1: Sarah’s research diary

This is a text alternative to Figure 3: Sarah’s research diary

Details of research are in note form as follows:

Keywords

- Distance education OR
- Distance learning
- +library
- +Australia

Databases

- Eric & BEI – 10/8
- Left out ‘library’ keywords
- 27 hits – abstracts in yellow file
- Ltd to 1995–
- *send article by Bruce to Gill
- LISA lib & info science – 15/8
- Ltd to 1995–
- Too many hits – added in ‘information skills’ to narrow
- Hits * Article by lecturer at Edith C Uni, check for email address and contact…? (google)
- IBSS (Soc Sci) – to do
Web Search

- Google – 15/8
- Australia, libraries, distance education
- 1st 20 on bookmarks file ‘Australia’
- *check later
- *check education web pages – link to library
- Homepages worldwide somewhere?