Library

Getting started with your Arts Dissertation

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# Introduction

Starting a dissertation for the first time can be a daunting process. It may be the first time that you have not had a reading list to help you know which sources to look at. This guide will help you to come up with a strategy for finding the relevant publications on your dissertation topic.

It’s important to start searching for Library resources early in the dissertation process. You may find that you need to alter your topic if you find that what you are trying to do is too specialised or too broad. The earlier you find this out the better!

# Getting started – establish your keywords

To find information on your topic you will need to search a range of catalogues and databases. In order to do that you need to decide on your Keywords – the words that describe your topic.

* **Synonyms** – words with the same, or a similar meaning
* **Alternative** terms, e.g.
* **Related words**, e.g. Scotland, Scottish, Scots
* Different **spellings**, e.g. theatre, theatre
* More **general terms** that cover your topic, e.g.

# Ways of coming up with more keywords

* Do an initial search using **Library search** or specific **Search for Books** using some or all of the words from your dissertation title. Look at the detailed records for any relevant books – check to see if they have a summary or subject headings. These may suggest some alternative terms.
* Use a **reference source** (e.g. an Oxford Handbook) to find an introductory article on your topic. Scan this for any useful terms.
* Look at the initial books your search has produced – study any **bibliographies** or **lists of references** for additional relevant terms (this is also a way of finding other relevant material).

# What to do once you have a set of keywords

Once you have a set of keywords to start searching with you need to decide where to look. In nearly all cases you will need to use more than one search tool to find out about all the publications that are relevant to your topic.

* **Library search**: good for doing an initial search across multiple subjects for books and journal article held by the University Library.
* **Subject databases**: you may not have used these before – you use them to identify publications on a particular topic. Some are bibliographic (only give details of publications) and others are full text. Some of the books and articles they list may not be held by the Library, but we can probably get them for you. See the list of Databases by subject on the Library home page to get an idea of the best databases for you to search. Your College Librarian can also help.
* Search engines: you will probably be familiar with these, but they are not always the best tool for finding academic articles.

# Library Search

An integrated search facility for the Library’s physical and electronic resources.

**Strengths**: results are guaranteed to be good quality academic information. Publications should be available in the Library to borrow or online via Library subscriptions. Ability to limit by e.g. type of material, date, language etc.

**Weaknesses**: can generate lots of results – need to use search limiters to reduce the number.

# Subject databases

A wide range of individual search tools that will find information about items such as books, articles and conference proceedings.

**Strengths**: enable you to find high quality, peer reviewed information. Help you to perform a comprehensive search for material on your topic.

**Weaknesses**: there are a lot of databases, and you need to know which are the best ones to use for your search. Not all databases give direct links to full text, so you may need to go back and check Library Search to see if we have the publication you need.

# Google

General search engine.

**Strengths** – finding answers to specific questions, getting an overview of a new topic, getting some information where you are struggling to find anything on a topic, finding information on current or recent topics, finding openly available material.

**Weaknesses** - poor quality of information – there is no quality control of information, some of which will be inaccurate, biased or unreliable. Too much information – hard to filter down results to a manageable level. Tailored search results if you have a Google account – not always helpful for academic searching.

# Google Scholar

A freely available search engine that indexes material from a wide range of scholarly publications.

**Strengths** – a starting point for research with a familiar interface. Focused on academic publications. Quickly locating a specific article. A staring point if you are not sure which Library database to use or are not finding much information.

**Weaknesses** - lack of information about scope. Coverage of articles may not be up to date. Using it off campus may mean that you cannot access articles that the Library subscribes to. Lack of ability to carry out sophisticated searches due to wide range of sources information is pulled from.

# Get more help

If you need help working out which search tools will be most helpful for your topic you can get in touch with your College Librarian.

Richard Bapty (richard.bapty@glasgow.ac.uk) and Morag Greig (morag.greig@glasgow.ac.uk) are the Arts College Librarians. See Your subject on the Library page for Students to find out who supports your subject area.

You can make an appointment to see us using the link on the Library page for Students to Book an appointment.

You can also e-mail us directly.