



Chapter 3

SOURCING INFORMATION
FOR YOUR THESIS

SOURCING INFORMATION FOR YOUR THESIS

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Introduction

As stated in the previous chapter, in order to broaden your understanding of a topic, including the various viewpoints, you need to consult a variety of written sources including books, journals and periodicals.

Through a questions and answers approach, this chapter aims to guide you in the right direction when looking for information. It seeks to complement the information skills training your library provides, rather than to replace it.

One of the diseases of this age is the multiplicity of books; they doth so overcharge the world that it is not able to digest the abundance of idle matter that is every day hatched and brought forth into the world.

Barnaby Rich (1613)

What would Barnaby Rich say now, when the number of books and other information sources has increased so dramatically? Unlike scholars of old, the modern day researcher is not confined to print material. Research libraries now have thousands of journals and other information sources available electronically. With internet access many of these can be accessed from home or from another location, so even the concept of the library as a physical space is changing.

While the developments in electronic journals, information databases and electronic books provide an increasingly vast and exciting array of information, to the new researcher carrying out a literature search can appear a daunting task. A systematic approach is crucial to ensure you do not waste time and effort.

Many libraries have guides on using the various sources of information on offer. Generally there is an Information Desk where staff can help with your query and where possible refer you to a librarian with more specialised knowledge of your subject area.

The Internet and research

Q. How can I use the Internet in my research?

A. The Internet is one of many tools you can use for finding information. In fact you could regard it as a gateway. Through the Internet you can access the library catalogue, which lists the items the library holds. Via the Internet, it is possible to access large numbers of electronic resources to which the library subscribes. This allows you to read thousands of journals and access reference works such as dictionaries and encyclopaedias. While this material is web-based, it is generally only available to registered students and staff. In addition to the above, there is lots of freely available information on the Internet. Some is of high quality; other less so. When writing a thesis the quality of the information you source is of crucial importance.

Q. Does this mean that I don't actually have to come to the library to use the library resources?

A. While you can identify books that are in the library, via the library catalogue, which is on the web, you must actually come to the library to borrow the books you identify. While the library subscribes to some electronic books (e-books), the subject most frequently covered by publishers in this area is computer science. For the present, most books are still in paper format and this will remain the case for some time. However, you do not have to come to the library to access the electronic journal collection.

Using the library for research

Q. How can I use the library catalogue?

A. The catalogue can be a useful starting point in a literature search. Each library has its own catalogue. This is generally a computer catalogue, which you can use to identify books where you know the author or the title or the subject. Each book in a library is assigned a shelf mark or number (also known as a classification number). The catalogue record will indicate the number of the book. You will save yourself a lot of time if you learn to use the library catalogue effectively.

Q. What are the main information sources the library can offer?

A. The following chart lists different types of information. Generally these sources are available in print and/or electronic format, so it may not be necessary to visit the library to use them.

Different types of information sources:

Type	Purpose
Encyclopaedias	Useful for overviews and background information – can be general or subject specific
Dictionaries	Short definitions of topics – can be general or subject specific
Directories	Useful for information about organisations, people and places
Textbooks	Comprehensive coverage of a topic
Journals	Short articles on specific topics, generally current
Magazines/Periodicals	Short articles, less scholarly than journals
Newspapers	Short current news items

Q. Where should I start?

A. This really depends on what you are looking for and the level of information you need. Books are useful for background reading and comprehensive overviews of a topic. Journals are useful for current thinking and developments in a particular area. Journals are academic magazines published at regular intervals. They are called refereed publications. This means that articles submitted for publication go before a panel of experts before being approved for inclusion in an issue. This ensures that articles published in such journals are of a high quality.

Journals

Q. If I want to find a journal, where do I go?

A. All print journals are listed in the library catalogue. Electronic journals are also listed and can be linked to from the library website.

Q. How do I know what articles are in a journal?

A. Articles can be identified by browsing an individual volume (print or electronic) or by consulting the large range of databases that index and give brief descriptions or full-text of journal articles.

Databases

Q. What is a database?

A. This is a regularly updated organised file of information that can be rapidly searched and

retrieved by a computer. Some databases are full-text; that means the entire article instead of a summary of the article is available. Other databases are bibliographic i.e. the records contain information about a document such as titles, authors and so on rather than the document itself. Some databases cover a broad subject area such as *Academic Search Premier* and others are subject specific such as *LION Literature Online*.

Q. How do I search a database?

- A.**
1. Go to the library website.
 2. Identify the best databases for your topic (do this in consultation with your supervisor and your subject librarian).
 3. Create your search – this involves thinking about your keywords and concepts, considering alternative terms, whether you want to use singular and plural forms of words and so forth.
 4. Use the Help Screens which most databases offer to get guidance on how to search effectively.
 5. Execute your search on one database.
 6. Evaluate your results, deciding if there are too many or too few. Be realistic about how many items you can actually read. Don't be waylaid by material that may be loosely related to your topic. Stay focused on your actual topic. Too few results can happen if your search terms are too narrow and too many results can be due to your search being too broad.
 7. Re-do the search to broaden or narrow the search if necessary.
 8. With full-text results – e-mail, print or save the article.
 9. With bibliographic references – take down the full details of the item such as author, title of article, journal title, date of publication, volume, issue and page numbers. You can use this information to see if the articles are available in print in your library. If they are not available ask the librarian if you can borrow them through an Inter-Library Loan.

Assessing quality of information

Q. With such a vast amount of information available via the web and other sources, how do I assess the quality of the information I find?

A. Electronic information can and does vary greatly in quality.

Consider the following when evaluating an electronic resource:

- **Currency:** Does the website display the time it was last updated? This is generally at the bottom of the website.
- **Source:** Who is producing this information? Is it someone from a university or from a commercial or other organisation? UK university websites have *ac* in the url, US and Australian university websites have *edu*.
- **Attribution:** Does the author clearly identify sources?
- **Authority:** What is the author's affiliation, background, previous publication history?
- **Authority of publisher:** If a journal, is it peer-reviewed?

Q. How do I find what theses relevant to my area of study have already been submitted to the University?

A. Postgraduate theses are held in the university library and listed in the library catalogue. It is possible to identify theses in a particular area by doing a keyword search under the term thesis and the subject matter e.g. *thesis inequality*. For doctoral theses, it may be necessary to do a search of national and international theses. You should discuss this with your subject librarian.

Statistics

Q. Where will I find Irish statistics?

A. The Central Statistics Office (CSO) is the government unit responsible for the collection and publication of most Irish official statistics. A full guide to their publications can be found on the web at <http://www.cso.ie/publications/general/genpub.html#guide>

Q. Where will I find European statistics?

A. Eurostat produces a wide range of European Union statistics. Many of these can be downloaded free of charge from www.europa.eu.int/comm/eurostat

Bibliographies and references

Q. What is a bibliography and how does it differ from a list of references?

A. A bibliography is a full list of all documents consulted in the course of your research. A list of references details only those documents referred to in the text. Documents which were consulted but not referred to in the text are omitted from this list. In a relatively short thesis (up to 30,000 words) it is common to present a list of references rather than a bibliography at the end of the thesis. However, irrespective of the length of your thesis, throughout the research phase you should record all of the documents you consult so that you have the details on hand if you need them.

Q. How do I deal with references within my thesis?

A. You will need to indicate within the text of your thesis the source of quotations, diagrams or paraphrased material. The reader can then move from these abbreviated references within the text to the bibliography or reference list to see the full details.

There are a variety of referencing styles – generally known as citation styles or methods – check with your department to see if it has a preferred style or ask your supervisor for direction on what style is best for your thesis. It is useful to establish what style you will use early on, as you can begin immediately to store your records in this format, thus saving valuable time as you finish your thesis. Many departments and disciplines now use the author-date method developed by the American Psychological Association. An author-date method is also used in this book. You insert the surname of the author and the year of publication into the text at the appropriate point. You can find more detail in Chapters 8 and 9 of *The Concise Rules of APA Style* (American Psychological Association, 2005).

Some general guidelines for referencing within the main body of your thesis:

- Text that is taken directly from its source must be acknowledged. If more than three lines of text are quoted these lines should be indented and single spaced. If less text is quoted it can be placed within quotation marks. In either case the source should be indicated immediately after the quote. The source is usually indicated by putting the author's last name, the year of publication and page number in a bracket, for example (Giddens, 2005: 8). The full reference details go in alphabetical order in the bibliography or reference list at the end of the thesis.
- When using a chart/graph/statistics/illustration cite the source using the same format.
- When paraphrasing an idea encountered in a document, even if you do not quote directly from the document, you must acknowledge the source. Use the same format but omit the page number.
- If the quotation is from the Internet give the full URL (uniform resource locator – website address) of the web page and also the date that the page was accessed; web page addresses can change so it is important to indicate when you accessed it.

Q. When do I begin working on the bibliography or reference list?

A. It is important that you keep a record of the literature you read. Begin recording as soon as you start to read. It doesn't matter whether you keep your references in your research notebook, on separate index cards or as a file on the computer. The important thing is to have accurate, easily accessible information.

Q. How much information do I need for my bibliography or reference list?

A. The exact information varies according to the source. Here we look at the most common sources – books, journals and websites. APA (American Psychological Association).

Books: In the case of a book record the author(s) or editor(s), book title, publisher, place of publication and date of publication. For example: Murray, R. (2003) *How to write a thesis*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

If the book is a second or subsequent edition make a note of that also. Where no edition is given on the book, it is a first edition and this need not be stated. Record the page(s) you took your notes from.

If the book is a collection of writings by different authors, record the chapter title, page numbers and author(s) also. For example: Yambasu, S. (2004) 'Interrogating Displacement', in Ryan, A. and Walsh, T. (2004) *Unsettling The Horses*. Maynooth: MACE, pp. 20-28.

It is useful to record the call number of library books consulted as this will save you having to check the catalogue later if you want to find a book again.

Journals: In the case of a journal or periodical, record the author(s) of the article, the title of the article, the title of the journal, the volume and issue, year and page numbers. For example: Fallon, H. (2004) Comparing World Englishes: a research guide. *World Englishes*, 23(2) pp. 309-316.

Websites: In the case of a website, record the web site address – the URL and the date the site was accessed. It should be noted that if you are citing an article from a journal and have read the electronic version via either the publisher's website or from a database, there is no need to state which database you found the article on. Give the full bibliographic details as you would for a print journal. If you are accessing an electronic only journal give the URL of the journal.

Q. Where do I get this information from?

A. It is always best to take the bibliographic details (place of publication and so on) of a book from the book itself, rather than from a library catalogue. Many libraries now buy in computer catalogue records. Because these records are often generated by the supplier before a book is actually published, they may contain an approximate date of publication. If you see the following in a catalogue record it indicates that it is an approximate date of publication c2004.

Q. What is a bibliographic management software package?

A. Bibliographic management software packages are computer programmes designed to manage and organise your references. They allow you to directly download reference details from online databases. The three most popular products are *EndNote*, *Reference Manager*, and *ProCite*, all produced by Thomson Researchsoft. Some universities have site wide licenses and other universities allow each department to choose their preferred package. Individuals can also buy these packages for use on their PCs. Further information is available at <http://www.isiresearchsoft.com/>

Note-taking and writing

Q. When I'm reading I'll need to take notes. How detailed should they be?

A. As you record what you read do not merely summarise what you encounter instead begin to critique it – think in terms of making notes rather than taking notes.

Exercise:

Consider the following questions:

- Who produced the document you are reading? (The source of the material is important. Is the writer an acknowledged expert on the topic?)
- List the perspectives through which the author approached the topic. Does s/he belong to a professional association? To what extent might that influence his/her stance on an issue?
- What are the main issues raised by the author?
- Of the documents you have read, identify the issues on which they were all in agreement.
- Were there disagreements? If yes, what issues were contentious?

If you copy down exact words put them in quotation marks. Later if you use them in your writing you must cite the source. Make sure you know where each note/quotation comes from. Avoid copious photocopying. Apart from the expense, it can delay the work of reading and thinking.

Q. When should I move from note-making to writing?

A. *You don't know what it is to stay a whole day with your head in your hands trying to squeeze your unfortunate brain so as to find a word.* Gustave Flaubert

Or perhaps you do! If Flaubert experienced difficulty in coming up with words what hope for the rest of us? Starting to write can be a very challenging task. Ideally you should begin writing while you are still reading. Writing a thesis starts with writing, not with preparing to write (Watson, 1987: 39). The act of writing in itself is a process of discovery. As you write you will become aware of your information gaps. Writing doesn't have to be perfect or indeed very good to start with. Consider the following quotation from Watson (1987: 39).

Authors – and especially young authors – often suffer from a writing bloc or “white-paper phobia”; and their suffering arises from the unspoken thought that, if they are to write at all, they must write well. And so, without meaning to do so, they forbid themselves to write – and then worry that they cannot.

Don't try to write something perfect, just write. With each sentence you write the process will get easier. Every sentence you write, even every word, can be revised later.

“I just put down any sort of rubbish,” a celebrated critic once remarked about his first attempts. And putting down rubbish is good advice...the truth is that once a sentence is lying on the page, it is often shatteringly clear what is right and what is wrong with it. Put it down, and go on putting more of it down. Everything can be mended later. (Watson, 1987: 39)

When writing a thesis everything has to be 'mended later'. A thesis cannot be written from start to finish. It requires constant revisions. In order to get started Murray (2002) suggests you write five hundred words describing what you are going to write about in your next writing session. She suggests this writing be in complete sentences, rather than bullet points or keywords. The purpose is not to make notes to work from later but to do a sort of warm up so as to be ready to write.

The prompts Murray uses include completing the following sentences:

- My thesis is about....
- The stage I am now at is...
- The next step is...
- What I am interested in finding out is....
- Since last week/month I have progressed my thesis by...
- I have identified a problem with....

(Murray, 2002: 67)

Conclusion

This chapter has given you basic tools for sourcing information. It has helped you to assess the quality of information that you uncover, shown you how to reference material and compile a bibliography. It has also given you some guidelines for moving from mere note taking to the more formal writing.