

UNISON GUIDE TO LITERATURE SEARCHING

Getting the right advice

This is an easy to read guide to literature searching. It has a list of recommended websites that will give you a gateway to the wealth of information on health available on the web, and help you to develop study and literature-search skills.

Most students will know that their first port of call should always be their college library. Almost all college libraries run courses on how to access information. Find out what your college has to offer in terms of accessing information relevant to your studies and development.

Read the questions

Read questions carefully and make sure you are clear in your mind about what the questions are asking. A good tip is to have the questions in front of you when making notes. It sounds simple, but undertaking a literature search can be very time consuming, you need to be disciplined and look at material that is relevant to your needs.

Brainstorm

The object of this exercise is to find out the following:

- What you know about the issues that the essay questions raise
- The questions you want your sources to answer.

This activity need not be time-consuming. It will certainly save you time in the long term, as it will help you to target and to develop your search strategy. It will also help you to evaluate critically the sources you use and to extract only the information you need to write your essay.

Use a wide range of sources

Do not rely on one source, information can and should be gleaned from a number of different sources. You can work from sources ranging from

general to the specific. An example would be to start your search with general sources such as dictionaries (e.g. Oxford Dictionary of Nursing) or general textbooks and then widen your search to more specialist books, research articles and journal articles.

Whenever you read a book or an article remember to read the bibliography and the sources that the author has used. In this way you will gradually widen your search and be able to critically evaluate the relevance of any piece of writing.

Using the web

The web is an invaluable source of information, nevertheless it needs to be treated with caution. Here are a few pointers on making good use of the internet. Use it in addition to, and not to the exclusion of, other sources.

Preparation: Spend time planning your search and thinking about what search engines you are going to use. Think about what subjects you need information on and what terms you are going to use in your search.

Familiarise yourself with the search engines you will be using; this is so that you are not bogged down trying to figure out how to get the information from a particular search engine.

Narrowing your search: All the search engines have tools, which you can use to narrow or widen your search. Most engines, such as Google, have an advanced search facility which is worth spending time mastering.

There is also a technique known as *Boolean logic*. This is a means of combining search terms to widen or narrow your search. The internet contains some excellent guides to this and other such tools (see list of websites) which will help you.

Be selective: Anyone can publish on the internet so it is crucial to develop a critical eye when using it. Try to use medical or nursing sites.

Look at the web address (URL—uniform resources location): Academic sites hosted by universities and higher educational institutes will frequently contain ‘*ac*’ or ‘*edu*’ within the main part of the address, e.g. bbk.ac.uk/ or anu.edu.au/.

Government organisations often use the designator ‘*gov*’. These include archive offices and government departments.

The designator ‘*org*’ embraces various semi-official or non-governmental bodies, societies and more commercial bodies.

Sites posted by private individuals or commercial organisations will invariably be hosted by a commercial internet provider, e.g. geocities.com/. The clue is in the designators ‘*com*’ and ‘*net*’.

Assessing the quality of authorship: You can do this by checking the site address. For example a website address containing the ‘*ac*’ designator indicates the author is linked to a university. You can check the author’s credentials by doing a name search using a search engine such as Google. Check the bibliographies of articles written by the author. It is generally best to steer clear of authors who do not provide bibliographies. A good bibliography shows that it is a well-researched article or source.

Nursing and medical databases: CINAHL and MEDLINE are the most popular nursing and medical databases and both are accessible either through CD-ROM or the Internet. MEDLINE is available free of charge on the Internet (see list of websites). However, access to CINAHL is by subscription only, but you should be able to access it via your college library.

Recommended websites

bbc.co.uk/webwise/

BBC’s guide on searching the web. This gives a comprehensive guide on using the web. The “Ask Bruce” pages are particularly useful.

<http://library.albany.edu/subject/tutorials/education/boolean.html>

Detailed guide to Boolean logic and how to improve your search results.

<https://he.palgrave.com/studentstudyskills/page/Essay-writing/>

This is the website of the publisher Palgrave. Although this site’s primary purpose is to advertise Palgrave’s books, it also contains a useful guide on essay writing. This includes a section on research skills.

ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi

This website gives you access to the United States’ National Library of Medicine database, commonly known as Medline. Before using the site it is advisable to click on the tutorial pages to find out how best to search the database. Your library may also provide access to Medline (as well as CINAHL) through CD-ROM or the web, so once again it is best to ask your librarian for advice.

nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/

Medline Plus is a directory of selective information derived from the National Library of Medicine (see above). It has a strong American bias, and its coverage is very selective compared to the whole Medline database. However it is relatively easy to use and can be useful as a basic reference source.

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/nlmcatalog/journals>

This link provides access to all full-text nursing and medical journals available through the National Library of Medicine.

dh.gov.uk

Homepage of the Department of Health website. Contains a wealth of information on the government's health policies and programmes.

<http://online.hscni.net/>

Gateway to Health and Social Care Services in Northern Ireland.

show.scot.nhs.uk/

Official website of NHS Scotland.

wales.nhs.uk/

Official website of NHS Wales.

nmc-uk.org

Link to the NMC (Nursing and Midwifery Council) site. The NMC is the regulatory body responsible for upholding professional standards in nursing.

<http://www.hcpc-uk.org/>

Link to the Health Professions Council (HPC), responsible for regulating 13 health professions including the following groups:

Arts therapists; biomedical scientists; chiropodists and podiatrists; clinical scientists; dieticians; occupational therapists; operating department

practitioners; orthoptists; paramedics; physiotherapists; prosthetists and radiographers and speech and language therapists.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health>

The BBC's Health website. This is an excellent website, however, to make full use of this site it is important to familiarise yourself with the BBC's search engine facility.

<http://www.theguardian.com/society/health>

Link to The Guardian's health website.

nursingtimes.net

Link to the Nursing Times website. This site is password protected but to register is free of charge. The site gives access to an archive of Nursing Times features and articles.

<http://www.unison.org.uk/at-work/health-care/>

Last, but not least, access to the UNISON Health website. Provides access to a wealth of information on a wide range of issues such as Agenda for Change, domestic violence, privatisation and foundation trusts. This site is continually updated with new and revised information and advice.

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