My Learning Essentials

Shopping for information: Introducing subject databases

CHEAT SHEET

https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/mle/introducing-databases/
Introduction

This resource looks at using subject databases to shop for information resources.

We will focus on the following areas:

1. **WHAT** do they do
2. **HOW** do I use them
3. **WHY** are there so many
4. **WHAT** else can they do
5. **WHICH** should I use
Subject databases give us access to information.

Some of them organise information about academic journals to make it easier for you to find the ones you need.

Others contain statistics, newspaper articles, specialist reports or other types of information, often focusing on particular subject areas or industries.

Think of them as being like shopping websites for information.
Subject Databases

Databases provide access to scholarly material from academic publishers and specialist information providers.

Much of this material will be peer-reviewed, which guarantees that the content will be of the highest quality. Your subject guide lists the key databases for your subject.

You will probably be less familiar with searching subject databases than Google or Google Scholar. However, they give you access to the type of high quality material that your tutors will be looking for in your work.

Subject Databases

Definition:

A database which provides bibliographic information about items such as books, articles and conference proceedings.
Subject databases are a lot like online shopping sites without the pictures. A lot of the features you’ll find are similar in both.

**My Account**
Databases allow you to set up an account to set your search preferences, save results and save searches you may want to repeat in the future.

**Search**
All databases have a search facility. Most also have an advanced search so you can get more specific, relevant results.

**Filter/categories**
Filter your results by category to remove irrelevant results. Databases often categorise information in a number of ways, including by subject area, language and date of publication.
There are a lot of different databases; they all look slightly different and will often use different terminology.

This can seem a bit confusing, but it’s no different from online shopping. No two shopping websites are the same but they all have similar features. It doesn’t take long to find what you need when using a site that you’ve never used before.

Databases are the same; once you know what you’re looking for, you can quickly familiarise yourself with new ones.
Compare these two shopping sites. They have different layouts and use some different terminology, but they have the same basic features.

Once you know what you're looking for, it'll be easy enough to find a tin of beans.
This is what a standard database search interface looks like. Specific details and terminology will vary across different platforms, but the basic features will be the same. You just need to know what to look for.

**Search field**
Enter your search term here. Sometimes, a single search box will be the default option, and you'll need to click **advanced search** or similar if you want extra features.

**Additional terms**
Enter other search term here if you want to search for more than one word or phrase.

**Connectors**
Here you can specify how you want to combine your terms using **AND / OR**.
This is what a standard database search interface looks like. Specific details and terminology will vary across different platforms, but the basic features will be the same. You just need to know what to look for.

**Search in...**
This drop-down menu lets you specify where you want to search. Some useful options include abstract, author name, title, topic or full text.

**Limits**
You can specify a number of ways to limit your search results. Databases often offer many ways to limit your search. Some of the most useful options include publication date, language and source type. This feature is sometimes called *refine, options* or *parameters*. If you don't see this option straight away, look for a link called something like *show limits*.

**Options**
- Limit to: Full text, Scholarly journals
- Language: Afrikaans, Arabic, Bulgarian, Catalan, Czech
- Source type: Books, Conference papers, Dissertations, Encyclopaedias, Journal articles
3. Why are there so many?

There are a lot of different databases, which can be confusing. Think about shopping again though; there are hundreds of online shopping sites, and there are two main reasons for this.

a) Different sites sell different things

You probably wouldn’t use the same site to buy a canoe as you would to buy a tin of beans. Subject databases are the same; they cover different subject areas. Some have a broader coverage than others, and some are more specialised, but no one database will cover everything.

b) Sites are run by competing companies

Just as no shopping site has exclusive access to beans, no database has exclusive access to a particular subject area. Electronic publishing is a business, and providers are competing against each other to get libraries’ custom.
Most platforms have extra features on top of the searching facility.

A few common features are:

1. **Saved searches**
   This allows you to save the details of a particular search to run again in the future. Look for something like “my account”, “save this search” or similar.

2. **Export citations**
   This allows you to save the references of your search results, often in a variety of formats. This is particularly useful if you’re using a reference management application such as EndNote. Look for “export to…”, “save citations” or similar.

3. **Create an alert**
   This allows you to set up an email or RSS alert on new results for a particular search. This is particularly useful if you’re doing research in a quickly-changing area. Look for “create an alert”, “RSS feed” or similar.
Don't be put off by complicated-looking results screens: remember that don't have to use all of these features. If they're not useful to you, just ignore them!

Save results

Email, print or download details of your search results. Sometimes these options are grouped together under something like save results or export; other times they'll be listed as separate options like print, email and download.

Export citations

Save the bibliographic details of these results to import into EndNote or other reference management software. Sometimes called export to... save citations or similar. If you are an EndNote user, look out for a button labelled export to EndNote.
Don't be put off by complicated-looking results screens: remember that don't have to use all of these features. If they're not useful to you, just ignore them!
5. Which should I use?

Because there are so many different databases, it can be tricky to work out which ones you should use. Your Library subject page is the best place to start: it lists all of the most relevant databases for your subject area.

Visit your subject page to get started. Your subject databases are listed on the databases page under the resources tab.
Summary

We have now answered these questions about subject databases:

1. **WHAT** do they do?

2. **HOW** do I use them?

3. **WHY** are there so many?

4. **WHAT** else can they do?

5. **WHICH** should I use?

You should now have an understanding of the basic principles of using subject databases for finding information for your assignments.
Keep in touch!
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Related resources

1. Knowing where to look: your search toolkit
2. Making referencing easy: introducing EndNote online
3. Planning ahead: making your search work