My Learning Essentials

Knowing where to look:
Your search toolkit

CHEAT SHEET

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www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/learning-objects/mle/search-toolkit
Introduction

There are a number of search tools available to find information for your academic work.

1. **GOOGLE**
   Searches billions of webpages openly available on the web

2. **GOOGLE SCHOLAR**
   Searches for academic texts across a large number of sources

3. **LIBRARY SEARCH**
   Searches all of the Library’s electronic and physical resources

4. **SUBJECT DATABASES**
   Searches high-quality scholarly material in specific subject areas

In this resource we’ll examine the benefits and drawbacks of each of these tools.
Google is the world's most popular search engine, so much so that the word Google has made the unusual leap from a company name to a verb.

Many people search Google on a daily basis for personal use, so it's very likely that you'll already be familiar with using Google. This section looks at using it as part of your academic research.
What can you find?

All sorts: almost anything that is openly available on the web can be found by searching Google. For your academic work, you can use it to find:

- government information
- company/organisation websites
- blogs and discussion forums on your subject area
- dictionaries and encyclopedias and more.

Quality of results

Variable.

There is no review process for most information published on the web, so you need to be critical when using it.
Quantity of results

High. This is where information overload can become an issue.

Generating thousands of results can also lead to first-page-it is, where you settle for the first results you find and rarely look beyond the first page.

What’s it good for?

1. Finding quick answers to specific, factual questions.
2. Getting an overview of a topic that is new to you.
3. A starting point when you are struggling to find any information on a topic.
4. Finding openly available material such as government papers, statistics and recent newspaper articles.
Be wary of...

1. the filter bubble
   If you have a Google account, your search results will be tailored to reflect your interests. This is often useful when Googling for personal use, but it can be problematic when looking for information for your academic work.

2. commercial results
   A lot of the information you'll find will be of a commercial nature, as Google's main income comes from advertising.

3. poor quality information
   Anyone can publish online about any topic. There is no quality control of information; a lot of it is inaccurate, incomplete, biased, politically or commercially motivated and/or otherwise unreliable.
Google Scholar provides a simple way to search scholarly literature. From one search box, you can search across many sources and disciplines.

Its similarity to Google makes it very easy to use Google Scholar to find academic texts. However, Google Scholar doesn't provide access to everything you might need, and if you use it exclusively you're likely to miss out on a lot of other relevant resources.
What can you find?

You can access a wide variety of sources using Google Scholar, including:

- academic articles
- theses
- ebooks
- abstracts from academic publishers, professional societies, online repositories, universities and other websites.

Quality of results

Good, especially if you use the FindIt service to access resources held by the University of Manchester Library.
Quantity of results

Generally high, though not as many as a Google web search as you are already limiting your results to scholarly material.

What’s it good for?

1. A starting point for research.

2. Building a search. When combined with the FindIt service, in some cases it can provide a one-stop shop for relevant material.

3. Quickly locating a specific article title.
2 GOOGLE SCHOLAR

Be wary of...

1. **reliability**
   Google's definition of scholarly material may differ from your tutors’. It uses an algorithm that makes a calculated guess at what it thinks is scholarly, and Google does not release the parameters for what qualifies. You'll need to analyse the source for yourself to decide if it is scholarly or popular.

2. **limited coverage**
   It can take a while for articles to appear on Google Scholar, and a lot of academic journals don't allow their material to be searched by it, so you may miss out on a lot of relevant articles if you don't use other tools as well.

3. **limited scope**
   Google Scholar mainly covers journal articles, so it doesn't retrieve other types of information such as news items or statistics.
Library Search enables you to search the Library's electronic and physical resources using a single search box.

You can access Library Search from the University Library's website, or through the My Library tab in My Manchester.
What can you find?

Material held or subscribed to by the University Library, including:

- journal articles
- books
- ebooks and theses
- manuscripts and images

Quality of results

High.

Library Search only returns results from the Library's holdings.
Quantity of results

Variable. If you use the single search box first with no limits, you'll often get a very large number of results. You can use the refinement options down the left of the screen to limit the results to a manageable number, or use the advanced search option to improve the relevance of your results further.

What’s it good for?

1. A starting point for research.

2. Finding printed books and journals.

3. Finding Special Collections material, such as rare books, manuscripts and image collections.
3 LIBRARY SEARCH

Be wary of...

1. the filter bubble
   If you've told Library Search what your discipline is, your searches may exclude some results, similar to the way that Google personalises your searches. This can be useful, but be aware that it may bias your results in a certain direction.

2. limiting yourself
   When faced with a large number of results, it can be tempting to refine them to items available online only. You can miss out on a lot of relevant resources by doing this.
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 you to use in your work.
What can you find?

High-quality peer-reviewed scholarly material, including:

• journal articles
• book chapters
• reports
• reviews
• ebooks

There are also specialist databases which provide access to material such as detailed company information, reports and statistics; regional, national and international newspapers; and legal case histories and legislation.
Subject databases will return results only from peer-reviewed academic sources, so you can be sure that the information you find will be of high quality.

If you learn how to use databases effectively by planning an appropriate search, you will return a good number of relevant results.
4 SUBJECT DATABASES

What’s it good for?

1. Finding high-quality, peer-reviewed material.
2. Performing a comprehensive literature search for material on your topic.

Be wary of...

1. the filter bubble
   Searching databases may not look quite as straightforward as using other tools, but by using them you will search across few but high quality, relevant resources, so it will ultimately save you time.

2. limiting yourself
   There are a lot of databases available, and not all of them will be useful to you. Before you start, make sure you look at your subject guide to see which ones are most relevant to your own work.
Summary: choosing the right tool

We’ve examined the four main tools in your search toolkit:

1. **GOOGLE**
   - Searches billions of webpages openly available on the web

2. **GOOGLE SCHOLAR**
   - Searches for academic texts across a large number of sources

3. **LIBRARY SEARCH**
   - Searches all of the Library’s electronic and physical resources

4. **SUBJECT DATABASES**
   - Search high-quality scholarly material in specific subject areas

Choosing the right tool for your needs will help you to avoid information overload, and find the most relevant resources quickly and easily.
Related resources

1. Know your sources: types of information
2. Shopping for information: introducing subject databases
3. Finding the good stuff: evaluating your sources