

Chapter 24

Using the library

1. Introduction

The university library is likely to become one of your best friends during your postgraduate studies. As a postgraduate you will need your university library to find all the information you need to complete your work for assessment. Even if your lecturer provides you with reading materials, and does not require you to use the library, it is often an unstated expectation that postgraduate students will find *additional* sources of information on their own. This research is done using the databases and other resources available at the library. As a postgraduate, it is essential to be familiar with these resources.

Effective use of a library requires you to be informationally literate. This is a skill that is expected of postgraduates.

Being informationally literate means:

- Knowing where to **find information**
- Knowing where to **find help** if you are unsure
- Knowing **how to use** information when you get it

Note also that some information literacy skills become obsolete almost as soon as one learns them. This is due to the development of ever-changing online and computer-based systems. Therefore, these skills need *continual development* and *regular practice*. This chapter provides a starting point for learning these skills.

2. Why you need the library for your research

There are several important reasons why you need to be informationally literate and skilled at using a library effectively (Keig, 1993).

1 The information explosion

Information is expanding rapidly. Academic papers are continually being published in all fields of knowledge throughout the world. It is not possible to keep up with one's field of expertise solely by subscribing to a few major journals. Rather, you need

access to the library's ever-expanding resources, access with broader retrieval points beyond the university, and the skill to find relevant information as you need it.

In recent decades, the world has seen the rise of the internet as a research tool. While the internet is wonderful for research purposes, it is often over-utilized by students, and for the wrong reasons. Students are often unaware of how to distinguish the value of different internet resources. It is fair to say that, because of the internet, there has never been a time in human history where so much information is available. Unfortunately, however, much of the information available online is of poor or dubious quality (see **Chapter 7**, 'Unreliable sources'). The ability to distinguish credible resources from less reputable resources is critical. Another problem is the sheer *volume* of information. This means that it is harder and harder for researchers to keep abreast of information.

Choosing a topic

Students completing masters by coursework subjects often need to choose their own topic for individual research projects. Some topics, such as *The role of diet in causing or preventing cancer* are not only controversial, but have information being published about them daily. Other topics such as *The impact of climate change on rising sea levels*, while not these days scientifically controversial, are beset with political issues and challenges, and an overwhelming number of publications in many areas. These types of topics are sometimes referred to as **hot topics**. While there are advantages in working in 'hot' topics, the disadvantages are that there is often too much new changing information for a postgraduate student to be able to keep on top of.

On the other hand, if you choose a topic that is no longer being researched in academic circles – sometimes referred to as a **cold topic** – there can be too little recent published information. An example of this would be *The role of St. Anselm's third version of the ontological argument in religious debates over God's existence*. This topic is no longer considered very relevant, and so is of little interest to most academics outside Theology. Choosing a 'cold topic' might make researching the topic easier, but you may find it hard making your research current and make your qualifications relevant to the world outside the university.

A topic somewhere between these two extremes, a **warm research topic**, can be best. A warm topic might take a narrow area of a wider debate, e.g. *The role of climate change on ocean acidification and its impact on sponges*. This is sufficiently current and topical to have a lot of sources to choose from, and it is sufficiently narrow not to be overwhelming in terms of finding relevant resources.

The library can help you here, as **specialist librarians** are experts in finding key sources of information for topics of current interest. They also know which resources are credible and up to date. Make sure you learn who these people are and ask for their help. Do this within the first few weeks of your postgraduate candidature.

2 Information systems

The library provides information systems to access what has been written in a particular field and guidance about how to use materials for your own research. Information sources may be in a variety of forms. These may include indexes in paper format, online indexes, web-based databases and catalogues. More than ever, most databases are online; however, that does not mean that a paper-based index or an older technology such as a CD-ROM or even **microfiche** (flat film containing images of older publications, e.g. old newspapers) might not be suitable for your research projects. Knowledge of information systems can help you keep abreast of new developments. Knowing how to access suitable information using appropriate information systems (or 'using the right tool for the job') does two things:

- It demonstrates your wide knowledge
- It shows your research skills and level of information literacy

Both of these things are important for postgraduates. They are less critical for undergraduates. Lecturers are impressed by postgraduate students who can (a) find appropriate sources for the task at hand; (b) use the right technology to find those sources; and (c) where possible, integrate recently published sources into their essays and assignments.

In general, never simply rely on reading lists given to you by your lecturers. Always be on the lookout for new published material. Do this even if lecturers fail to mention this as a requirement. A postgraduate is distinguished from an undergraduate by his or her level of **scholarship**. Scholarship is the refined ability to find and use information from published sources in your own work as well as the ability to write well academically. A secondary reason why knowledge of information systems is important is that it can assist you in getting employment following your degree, as many jobs these days require information literacy skills.

3 Awareness of the points of view of others

You will encounter multiple points of view on any research topic as you start searching the literature in the library. It is important to be aware of the different points of view that exist in your field as this knowledge helps you to develop your own point of view about a body of knowledge. This is important, because as a postgraduate, you need to advance well-argued, and well-supported opinion *yourself*. This can be as simple as using your own prior work experience, if relevant, in the context of an academic issue, or it may be more creative (i.e. venturing a view on a topic on which there are already many different opinions). We looked at ways of advancing a point of view in writing in earlier of this book. Note again the critical importance of the library in finding appropriate information resources.

4 Having control through independent learning

Students that can use the library to find new and interesting resources are regarded highly by their lecturers. Such students demonstrate skills in scholarship. Some

students do not do this. They merely use the reading lists given to them by the lecturers. However, the best students try to *educate* their lecturers with new, up-to-date published sources. This involves skill in being aware of new resources, which in turn involves being **informationally literate**. Lecturers know most of the reading material on a subject, however, they do not know everything. If you can mention data from an article in your work that lecturers may not have seen, this will greatly impress them. Recall the importance of **independent learning** mentioned in Chapter 1.

Recall also the continuum of learning mentioned in **Chapter 1** (see 'The aim of postgraduate learning'). The more a student demonstrates independent learning as a postgraduate, the better the grades. The more the student shows originality in their thinking, the better the grades. This has direct relevance to information literacy, as it is the ability to find resources that contributes to one's ability to demonstrate *extending* knowledge, not merely *reproducing* knowledge (see **Chapter 1**).

3. How libraries are organized

Libraries are no longer just places where journals and books are kept, although this is still an important function of the library. They are also places where you can access other collections of electronic books, journals, and individual articles via computers. These electronic collections are called **databases** and they are like additional libraries, many with a **discipline-specific** focus. Your library pays expensive subscription fees to these databases so that students have a wide range of resources available for research. However, a major frustration for many students is realizing that the information is at hand but not knowing how to access it.

Most libraries offer introductory tutorials into searching their catalogues and databases which are well worth attending. Not only can you ask librarians questions, but you can often complete practical exercises in such tutorials that help you use the library. Thus, you get to practice doing searches with an expert at hand who can give you immediate help and advice if you have any difficulties. Take advantage of these tutorials, and this expertise, at the earliest opportunity and preferably *before* classes start.

1 The Dewey decimal system

The **Dewey decimal system** is a system for cataloguing library holdings used around the world. Its great advantage is that it allows for endless expansion. It is composed of numbers 001–999 which stand for the following areas:

000	Generalities
100	Philosophy and Psychology
200	Religion
300	Social sciences
400	Language

500	Natural Sciences and Mathematics
600	Technology (Applied Sciences)
700	The Arts
800	Literature and Rhetoric
900	Geography and History

In each category, there are further numbers which represent the sub-areas within that general area. For example, in the 300s (Social Sciences), the 310s relate to Statistics, the 320s relate to the Political Sciences and the 330s relate to Economics. These subareas are then divided into further categories as shown below (using Economics as an example):

330	Economics
331	Labor economics
332	Financial economics
333	Land economics
334	Cooperatives
335	Socialism and related systems
336	Public finance
337	International economics
338	Production
339	Macroeconomics and related topics

In each of these categories, there are further subdivisions. It is useful to know the Dewey system for your academic area so that you can go directly to the area of the library that holds texts that are relevant to your subject. This saves time.

2 The construction of a CALL number

Each item owned by the library, be it a book, a CD, a film or a journal (not, however, a journal *article* – see below), is given its own number, which is known as a **CALL number** or a Dewey Number. This locates that item within the Dewey system, so it is easy to find. To find the item you want, you therefore need to know the CALL number. Every part of a CALL number is important, as the different parts of the number tell us different things about the book. Sometimes CALL numbers can be long – the decimal point may be preceded by three numbers and followed by many more. When you find a book in the catalogue that you want to borrow, it is important to write the entire call number down, as well as the letters. You then need to locate the book by going to the part of the library where those numbered books are kept. Normally, shelves have the numbers of the books contained within them clearly shown at the ends of their aisles.

When you find your book, check it carefully to make sure that it has the right author and is the correct edition (see below).

CALL numbers

The CALL number (or **Dewey Number**) is the best way of identifying books and journals in the library. A CALL number looks like this:

709.04 A743H 2003

This is the CALL number for the book: *A History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Photography* by the author Hjørvardur Harvard Arnason:

- '709.04' is the number for modern Fine Arts resources
- 'A743H' is a combination of numbers and letters for this particular book.
- 'A' refers to the book's author, whose surname starts with A.
- The 'H' is the first letter in the title of the book: *A History of Modern Art*. (Note 'A', 'An' and 'The' are always omitted when cataloguing or listing items. The first letter is taken from the next significant word, in this case *History*.)
- 2003 is the edition of the book. (This book is in its 5th edition, the first being published in 1969.)

Some publisher terms may be useful here. The **edition** of a book refers to the number of times a book is published from a single printer's type-setting. An edition stays the same regardless of how many times a book may be reprinted unless the book is: (1) reset by the printer; (2) changed (in which case the book will say that it is: **revised** or **abridged** or **enlarged**); or (3) issued by a new publisher. If a book is issued by a new publisher or an edition is reprinted then it is called a **reprint**. ('Abridged', by the way, means a shorter version; 'enlarged' means physically bigger; 'revised' means the content has been added to or altered.)

If a book is only published once, there is generally no edition number mentioned. However, if a book is changed or revised and published more than once, it is referred to by its edition number. For example, if a book is published first in 1966 and again in 1970 and again in 1999, these are the 'first', 'second', and 'third' editions of the book respectively.

It is very important to ensure that you have the correct edition of a book if your lecturer has specified a particular edition, as information in later editions can vary enormously from information in earlier editions. If the edition is not included in the CALL number, then check on the **left-hand side** in the first few pages of the book (known as the **imprint page**) before the text starts. This is where all publishing details should appear.

Most university libraries around the world have guides or videos available. For example, have a look at the following Federation University tutorials:

- 'Help with searching for books and articles' <https://federation.edu.au/library/student-resources/help-with-searching>,

- 'How to construct a search string' <https://federation.edu.au/library/student-resources/help-with-searching/constructing-a-search-strategy>
- 'What are databases and journals?' <https://libguides.federation.edu.au/c.php?g=719250&p=5123663>.

Your own university will have similar guides to help you, and again don't forget to book into an introductory library tutorial if one is offered. This will usually be offered within the first few weeks of semester, or during any induction or orientation week at the university.

Confusion over names

If you are an international student from a non-English speaking background, make sure that you are clear about the use of surnames (family names) in western universities, especially in relation to books and journal articles. Getting them wrong is a very easy way to lose marks in assignments, especially when referencing (see **Chapter 7**). Many international students have trouble with this when they are looking for information and I frequently have to advise on usage.

The reason this occurs is because there are different naming conventions in use around the world. In many Asian countries, e.g. China, it is convention to refer to a person by their surname as a mark of respect, and names are routinely given with the surname *first*. In western countries, the reverse convention is generally adopted for most purposes *except* academic writing and when a name is used in a library catalogue or database.

How do you tell which is the given name and which is the surname? How can you be sure of correct usage? This can be problematic if you are not familiar with the nationalities of the names, and the naming conventions. The key to this is to look for a separating comma (,).

Normal western-style naming and writing conventions require the given name to be *first* and the surname *last* (e.g. book covers, signs on doors, in introductions between people). This convention is used *even when the name is a non-western name*. In this case there is no separating comma, e.g.:

- John Smith
- Hjorvardur Harvard Arnason (an Icelandic name)
- Dan Liu (a Chinese name)

In situations where filing or cataloguing is needed (e.g. in the library or in telephone books or directories) the reverse order is used: surnames *first* and given names *last*. Bibliographies or Reference Lists in academic papers are always *alphabetical by surname*, so you must likewise put the surname *first*. In this case, there has to be a separating comma:

- Smith, John
- Arnason, Hjorvardur Harvard
- Liu, Dan

Because a bibliographic file system is used to catalogue work in a library, you also identify writers and their work by means of surname first. Note also that when writing academic literature reviews or essays, it is convention to always refer to people by their surname: '*Smith argues ...*'; '*Jones claims ...*', etc. This is always true, unless, of course, you are introducing them in your writing: 'Professor John Smith, Head of the Department of Management claims that ...' (afterwards, you just say: 'Smith argues that ...', and so on).

The example of a book used earlier is by the Icelandic writer: Hjorvardur Harvard Arnason. There is no separating comma as this is as it appears on the book cover. Similarly, when introducing him it would be Hjorvardur Harvard Arnason. When cataloging the book, or when it appears on a reference list, the first (given) and second (middle) names are typically dropped, and initials are used. It would therefore appear as Arnason, H. H.

4. Journal articles

Journal articles are an important resource for postgraduate students, especially in areas of study where information is changing rapidly. If you are an information technology student or are involved in medical research, you would not want to rely solely on books for information. These fields change rapidly. But even if you are studying a field that moves slower, e.g. nursing or philosophy or visual arts, **currency of research** is always a good thing. Journal articles give you the latest information and help you to keep abreast of issues that a book, which takes several years to publish, cannot. There is, therefore, a greater *immediacy* to a journal article. Many academic debates are conducted via articles printed in consecutive issues of journals. It is therefore important that you know how to access these resources. Once again, make sure to undertake introductory classes to the Library holdings at your university at the earliest opportunity. If you are a higher degree student, make sure you make a time to meet a specialist **subject librarian**.

Finding a journal article can be much more difficult than finding a book. Whereas books have their own CALL numbers which are linked to the library catalogue, journal articles do not. Of course, journals have their own CALL numbers, but these can be of limited help when trying to locate one of the **specific journal articles** within a journal. Until recently, trying to locate journal *articles* used to be always a three-step process:

- To find a journal article, you first had to search a printed list that came out annually called an **Index**. If you wanted to access articles from different years you had to look at different lists often called a **List of Abstracts**. The list told you the volume and issue of the journal in which to find a specific article.
- You then had to go to the library catalogue and make sure they had subscribed to the journal that year and locate the specific volume and issue.
- Then you had to find the particular volume and issue to find the article you wanted.

These days, that process is a lot easier because of **electronic databases**. It is, however, still sometimes a three-stage process. This is described below.

5. Electronic databases

In many ways an electronic database is similar to a printed index for journal articles. Some older electronic databases come in the form of compact disks (CD-ROMs). However, these days most databases are available online from the publishers. Your university buys annual subscriptions to these databases. It is a source of frustration for librarians and lecturers when students do not avail themselves of these databases that have been purchased for their use. Often this is because students don't know they exist, or don't know how to use them – which is why it is important to cover this information in this book. It is also important that new postgraduate students make a time to see a librarian within the first few weeks of starting as a student and attend any classes that the library runs. This is one of the best uses of your time early in your studies.

An electronic database differs from a library catalogue in that it lists every journal article individually, whereas the library catalogue only lists the journal titles and dates. Conveniently, many databases also contain the **full text** of the article, usually as a PDF, or **portable document format**. This means that these days finding a specific article in a journal is sometimes only a one-step process, as you can save the article to disk or USB or print it out immediately. However, sometimes databases contain only an **abstract** (a short summary) and details about the journal and the volume in which it was published.

If this is the case, locating the abstract of an article you wish to read is the *first* step. *Secondly*, you might need to go to the normal library catalogue, look up the **journal title**, as opposed to the journal article, and make sure that the library has the correct volume of the journal (it may not, in which case you need to use an **inter-library loans** service). Then *finally*, you need to locate the hard copy on the library shelf. If your library has an electronic link to the journal you may be able to obtain that link from the catalogue and download the article from there. However, it should not be assumed that because there is no internet link to the journal the library does not have it in hard copy. Many students do not know that they have to carry out the *third* part of this process to access the journal article. Therefore, many of the resources on the database are sometimes not found, and therefore not used. This demonstrates poor skills in information literacy. I have known some students— believing that the library did not have the journal—to pay for articles that they could have obtained for free!

In place of this, many students rely solely on the internet, e.g. using Google to find articles of potential interest. However, it is strongly advised that postgraduate students use databases in preference to the internet. One of the first things you should do is to identify the key databases used in your specific subject area. In most universities, lists of databases are provided by librarians on their websites or in printed form. Find this information and learn how to use the databases. These databases will form the basis of much of the research work you do.

Your login and password are needed for accessing these databases, and you may use them within the library, from the computer laboratories, from home, or from other places around campus.

The internet as a research tool

While the internet can be highly useful for research purposes, it needs to be used with caution. Many students seem to think that 'googling' is the only way to do research. The best students, however, rarely use Google, or search engines like it, unless it is to access **Google Scholar**. <http://scholar.google.com/>. If you *must* use an internet search engine for research, use Google Scholar which filters a lot of worthless information and helps in finding articles from quality refereed journals. However, it is recommended you *don't* use it instead of specialist databases. Databases provide access to the most accurate, current and richest research resources available. Much of it is peer-reviewed and therefore of the highest quality. You have also indirectly paid for access to these databases via your student fees!

The internet's main disadvantage as a research tool is that anyone can post information on it. This means that all kinds of things can be said on the internet: false or accurate, poorly argued or well argued, helpful or worthless. Therefore, if you are to use internet for research purposes, do so with great care!

1. Advantages and disadvantages of databases

Electronic databases have their advantages and disadvantages. It is good to be aware of these so you can take measures to ensure you avoid problems, and maximize the benefits.

Advantages:

There are certainly many advantages to be gained from using the electronic version of an index to journal articles (Keig, 1993):

- *Breadth of search*: You can access information over *several years at once*. (By contrast, annual printed indexes can only be used one at a time).
- *Specificity*: Very specific searches can be achieved by *combining concepts*. This can be done using logical connectors (called **Boolean Operators**).
- *Speed*: compared with human searching techniques, the computer is very fast indeed.
- *Access and convenience*: Articles can be downloaded (increasingly, the full text of an article) on your topic. This is very convenient.

Disadvantages:

- *Not backdated*: The information revolution is still relatively young. You'll need to use the printed version of journals to pick up older references. Of course, just because an article is recent does not mean it is good and just because an article is 'old', and not given in an electronic database, does not mean it is 'not good'. For many students in disciplines such as Fine Arts, Philosophy, Arts or Law, the more informative and useful articles may only be available in paper-based indexing formats. This applies to some other subjects as well. If you only use an electronic database you may miss them completely.
- *Incomplete access*: Electronic indexes do not always contain the full texts of articles. At times, you will then need to find hard copies of the actual articles in the library's collections.
- *Misleading information*: You can't always get what you see in an electronic database. The Library may not hold all the journal articles that are indexed by the electronic databases. This can be frustrating. However, often librarians can advise you how to find it elsewhere.
- *Variability in operation*: Different **command structures** are used in different databases – no uniform method of searching exists that applies to all databases. (However, library staff often produce helpful database guides to help you understand these commands.)
- *Fosters laziness*: Full-text databases can make students lazy. That is, students often do not find extremely useful papers for their work simply because they do not use anything that cannot be immediately printed from the database. By contrast, a good postgraduate scholar with good information literacy skills will find and use excellent resources regardless of whether they are electronic-based or paper-based.

It would be wrong to assume that a search using an electronic database could yield all the references you might need for a topic. In fact, depending on your research topic, and the nature of your discipline area, you may miss a very valuable article which is unavailable in electronic form. It might be an article in paper form that is just a few minutes' walk from where you are using the electronic database! Therefore, it is not a bad idea to check **printed indexes** as well as electronic databases to make sure you have not missed anything potentially useful.

2. Choosing the right database

There are specific databases for different academic discipline areas. It is important to choose the right one to use. Your subject librarian can give you information about which databases can be used for the subjects you are studying. The following are examples: *AUSLIT* is a database used for articles on Australian literature. *PSYINFO* is used for psychology. *MLA* is a useful database if you are studying literature. *MEDLINE* is the key database used for medical topics. *APAIS* (Australian Public

Affairs Information Service) is used for information about Australia. *EconLit*, *Expanded Academic ASAP* and, especially, *Proquest* (e.g. *ABI / Inform*) are some of the best databases for Economics and Commerce students. You should certainly familiarize yourself with the databases available in your discipline before you begin your studies. The *Expanded Academic* database covers relatively broad topics, such as politics. It is impossible in a book like this to list them all. This information changes regularly as new databases become available.

6. Conclusion

This chapter has outlined some very basic information about the importance of libraries and how to use them. The effective use of the library is essential to postgraduate success. This chapter is not a substitute for the detailed information that can be obtained from specialist library staff at your local university library. They will be able to offer students classes in information literacy. They will also produce handouts on all aspects of library literacy: from Boolean search strings to guides in the use of specialist databases. Consult these staff early in your postgraduate candidature.







