

AIRS

Advanced Information Research Skills

AIRS Module 2

Preliminary search



airs.library.qut.edu.au

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Module 2: Preliminary search

[Workshop presentation \(YouTube, 10m32s\)](#)

Learning objectives

This module introduces the search process, provides activities to practice preliminary searches, and outlines a set of available search tools and resources. By the end of this module you should be able to:

- consider a systematic approach to searching the literature using a search methodology.

Applying the content to your resource log

As you progress through this module, consider, and refer to the requirements of the resource log and apply your learning to each question.

Resource Log

Preliminary search (3 marks)

List the key concepts, words or phrases **from your research question** and their synonyms or related terms. [See [Module 2.2](#)].

2.1 Develop your search methodology

Depending on the stage you are at in your research, or your search objective, a variety of different types of searches may be appropriate across the course of your research. Consider the search methodology below as a way to ensure effective and efficient searches.

1. Preliminary searching
2. Browsing journals
3. Comprehensive searching
4. Cited reference searching
5. Limiting - a search process technique used in the types of searching
6. Sustaining - with alerts

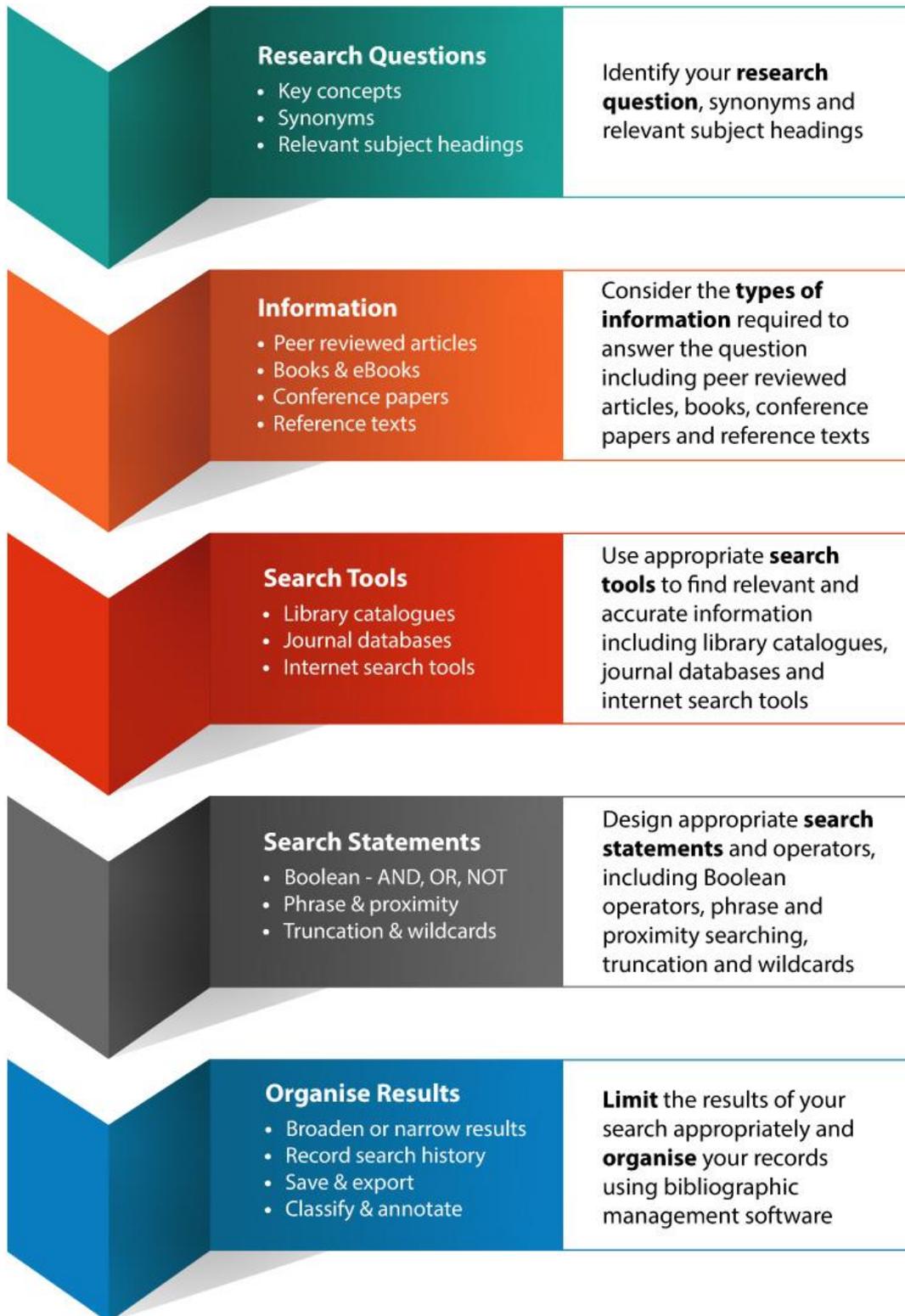
Steps in the search process

Once you have formulated your research question, you are ready to start searching. A well organised search ensures that information is efficiently and comprehensively retrieved and involves the following steps:

- identify your **research question**, synonyms and relevant subject headings (specific word/group of words used to describe the content of articles/books, which are assigned by

indexers using a controlled vocabulary)

- consider the **types of information** required to answer the question including peer reviewed articles, books, conference papers and reference texts
- use appropriate **search tools** to find relevant and accurate information including library catalogues, journal databases and internet search tools
- design appropriate **search statements** and operators, including Boolean operators, phrase and proximity searching, truncation and wildcards
- **limit** the results of your search appropriately and **organise** your records using bibliographic management software.



Unpacking the search process

Consider the search process in terms of four questions that need to be answered:

1. **What are you researching?** What are the key terms and synonyms that define your question? Are there subject terms that encompass the identified concepts? What type of information is important in your discipline area? For example, journal articles, conference papers, definitions from dictionaries etc.
2. **Where will you search?** Which tools will you use to find information? Will you use Library Search and Google Scholar to get started to get a sense of how others describe your topic area?
3. **How will you express your search terms in the search tools?** How will you construct your search statements and which search techniques will you use?
4. **How well did your search retrieve results?** Evaluate and broaden or narrow your search.

The literature review

A good literature review requires an effective and comprehensive literature search. The process of developing an effective search methodology will assist you to do your literature review required for your Stage 2/research proposal.

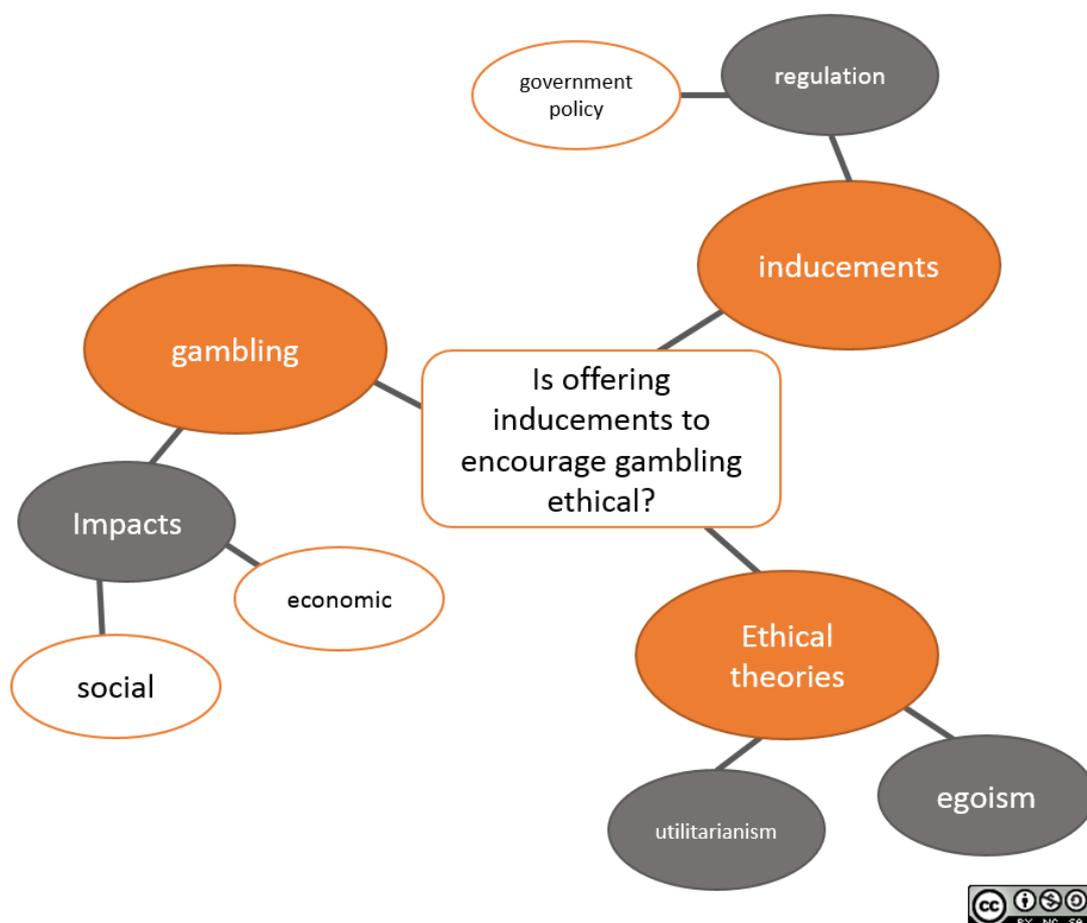
A literature review is an evaluative report of information found in the literature related to your selected area of study. The review should describe, summarise, evaluate and clarify this literature. It should give a theoretical base for the research and help you (the author) determine the nature of your research. A good literature review should:

- find what information already exist in your field of research
- identify the gaps in the literature
- find experts working in your field
- identify major seminal works
- identify main methodologies and research techniques
- identify main ideas, theories and conclusions and establish similarities and differences
- provide a context for your own research
- show relationships between previous studies and theories.

Writing the literature review allows you to demonstrate skills in the areas of information seeking, evaluation and critical appraisal.

Defining search terms

The first step in the process of searching is to identify the key concepts from your research question or search objectives. These concepts describe the kinds of information you need to investigate in order to answer your research question. Consider the concepts in the context of key readings you are already aware of or search around the topic generally before commencing serious research. A concept or mind map can help explore your topic and clarify the logic of these concepts and illustrate their relationships. You should also consider the different search objectives you might have relevant to the different sections of your thesis or stages of your research.



Example of a concept map: A concept map puts the main topic in the centre of the map and graphically represents the major concepts that relate to the main topic.

2.2 Preliminary searching in more detail

Introduction

Initial or preliminary searching helps to establish a basis for later specific or more comprehensive searching. Preliminary searching can help clarify the topic and supply basic knowledge upon which to develop an improved searching focus. It can help to refine your research question, find synonyms and to become clearer on the direction of your research. In addition, preliminary searching will assist identification of the key terminology in your field for the constructs you are interested in exploring. It is important to determine and use the terminology that experts in your field use, consider how the database thesaurus treat the terms in your research question - are there relevant subject headings? Remember, recognisability is about whether you can identify the terms in your question in the literature. Refer back to the property of recognisability for clarification. For preliminary searching, use general or broad search tools such as [Library Search](#) and [Google Scholar](#).

Finding synonyms

Before starting to search, spend some time formulating the key concepts of your research question, identifying synonyms for the words and phrases, and defining them within the theoretical framework of your topic. Explore the meaning of terms using a dictionary and find synonyms with a [thesaurus](#).

Searching subject headings

Subject headings are a set of terms and phrases, from a controlled vocabulary that are used to describe the content of books and articles and are assigned by cataloguers and indexers. Subject headings take some of the guess work out of searching, saves time and help make searching more effective and efficient and in many cases more directed. There are many different ways to describe the same term, a subject heading brings these terms together under a single word or phrase. Look to see whether the database you are searching has a thesaurus to browse for the subjects that match your topic/word/phrase.

Note that the term thesaurus, subject headings, descriptors, index terms and medical subject headings (MeSH) are interchangeable, meaning the same thing – a controlled vocabulary that categorises and defines terms and phrases.

Using [Library Search](#), complete the activity below.

Activity – Library Search

Go to the [QUT Library homepage](#) and start searching, using Library Search.

Search

A great starting point to search for articles and books. Also try databases and specialised search tools or [Google Scholar](#).

[Browse items](#) | [Advanced search](#) | [My Favourites](#)

- [Articles](#)
- [Books and ebooks](#)
- [Journals and magazines](#)

1. Enter words from your research question and click the search icon.
2. Skim results; evaluate titles, citations and abstracts.
3. From the most relevant results, use alternative terms to refine your search. Repeat until your result improves.
4. On the left of the result screen, use the options under 'filter your results' to further refine your search.

Library Search tips:

- Use double-quotation marks to search for words that go together, e.g. "teacher education".
- Refine your search to articles from peer-reviewed publications.
- Search using a seminal author last name with a topic word.
- Filter by format, study area, or date range.
- Click Save Query

Advantages to using Library Search	But keep in mind
<p>Useful for preliminary searching as a starting point to identifying key terminology.</p> <p>Library Search combines results from the physical collection, eBook collection, many databases and QUT ePrints.</p> <p>Searching is fast, easy, and uses a familiar interface.</p> <p>Search results include citations of many kinds of sources: books, journal articles, newspaper articles, conference proceedings, dissertations, photos, multimedia, and much more.</p>	<p>Not appropriate for comprehensive searches – use subject-specific databases instead.</p> <p>Vague or short searches will return too many results; searches using well-refined search terms or phrases in quotes will return fewer, more refined results.</p> <p>Be aware that Library Search doesn't provide access to all scholarly material available at QUT.</p> <p>Search mechanism is less sophisticated than those available within individual database platforms.</p>

2.3 Other search tools

Introduction

This section introduces additional search tools that may be useful to identify information for your research question. By the end of the section, you will have explored a range of resources including grey literature (information that has not been published commercially or indexed in major databases), other library catalogues and the technique of browsing important journals in your area of interest.

Selecting databases for your research

Databases can be used for many different aspects of your research, from developing your research proposal, writing your literature review, conducting research activities, writing up your results and discussing the significance and impact of your research.

Searching databases at the start of your research journey can:

- inspire creative ideas
- consolidate your understanding of your research area
- help you write a good research question
- accelerate the research proposal writing process
- provide the framework of study for the duration of your degree

Explore a few different databases to see what sorts of information they contain. Ask your supervisory team and your [Liaison Librarian](#) for guidance on what databases may be appropriate to answering your research question.

Activity – Finding the right databases

1. Go to the QUT Library [Databases](#) page.
2. Select your subject area.
3. Note the divisions by study area, formats and specialist researcher databases.
4. Read the synopses for the databases that are likely to be relevant. Consider subject relevance and breadth of coverage and the types of formats indexed in the database.

Finding theses

Examining theses in your discipline is good practice and is recommended early in your candidature. This strategy will assist in thinking about how to structure and format your thesis, the originality of your idea or question, and provide a source of rich bibliographies. Think about theses in terms of local, national and international content. For QUT theses check QUT ePrints,

Australian theses can be found in Trove and international in ProQuest Dissertations. Most universities, in many countries and some regions have open access repositories for theses, research publications, and sometimes datasets for researchers.

There are a number of tools available from QUT Library and the web for finding theses in your research area:

- [QUT ePrints](#) contains the online QUT theses.
- [Trove](#) provides access to the Australian theses managed by the National Library.
- [ProQuest Dissertations](#) contains international theses with a US focus.
- [Google Scholar](#) gives access to most open access repositories.

For links to international, regional and national repositories, see the [Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations list](#).

Finding key journals

Scanning the latest issues of certain journals is a valuable strategy to:

- gain an understanding of the research being done around your topic
- help you reflect on the scope and direction of your research
- identify the current trends in a discipline
- to ensure you find valuable information that might be overlooked in a database search

After searching journal databases and identifying the best articles for your topic it may become apparent that the most relevant articles are consistently found in a handful of journals.

Find out which journals are specific to your topic area:

- recommendations from your supervisor
- select high quality journals by subject area journals using Scopus, Web of Science and [SciMago Journal and Country Rank](#)
- search using your key concepts in Library Search with results limited by relevant journal format and subject terms to evaluate for best sources

Online journals via publisher websites

Some publishers may cover your subject area better than others. Journal publisher websites give quick access to the tables of contents, so you can scroll through the recent issues to get a feel for current trends. You might notice 'hot topics' of the day and adjust your research scope to consider new concepts or frameworks. You can subscribe to receive notification of the table of contents of new issues of key journals by email.

Here are some key journal publishers for QUT faculty areas:

- [Routledge/Taylor and Francis](#) and [Wiley](#) – multidisciplinary

- [Intellect](#) for arts, design, cultural studies, communication and media, film studies
- [Elsevier](#) and [Springer](#) for science, health and medicine
- [Wolters Kluwer](#) for law, business and health
- [Edward Elgar](#) for business, economics, politics, law
- [Sage](#) for education, arts, media, health, psychology, engineering, criminology and more
- [Emerald](#) for information technology, business and management.
- [Eric](#) for education.

Browsing print journals

In some subject areas, print journals are important. These areas tend to be the disciplines with a high reliance on images, e.g. art and design, music and architecture. Scanning the latest issues of print journals can therefore be a valuable option. New issues are available in the journal section of QUT Library. To physically browse and locate what the Library has in print, find out the general [call number range](#) for your research area. Popular print journals include:

- [Wallpaper](#) (fashion)
- [Rolling Stone Australia](#) (popular music)
- [Monument](#) (architecture)

Other library catalogues

Most universities provide access to their library's catalogue online and there are 'union catalogues' with the holdings of many libraries. At QUT you can request most items via online request using [Document Delivery](#). You can also request that your Liaison Librarian purchase additional items for the QUT Library collection.

Union catalogues include:

- [Trove](#)
- WorldCat is the world's largest catalogue, containing library catalogue holdings from many countries.

Grey literature

Grey literature is an umbrella term that describes materials produced on all levels of government, business and industry that is not distributed via commercial publishing methods. Grey literature allows for the introduction of alternative perspectives, is useful for exploring areas where there is little published evidence, and for finding recent and local resources.



Read the tip sheet: [Grey literature](#)