Getting Started with Search Tools

# 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: search high-quality scholarly material in specific subject areas.

In this resource, we’ll examine the benefits and drawbacks of each of these tools.

# Examining Google

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:

Google

Verb

1. To search the web, particularly using Google’s search engine.
2. To search the name of someone or something on the internet.

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 encyclopaedias 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.

**Tip:** To improve the quality of your results, you can use a domain search to limit your results to those from reputable websites.

For example, you might want to limit to **ac.uk** domains to search UK higher education websites, or **gov.uk** to search government websites.

You can specify a domain using the **advanced search** option. An even quicker option is to do this via your Google toolbar.

Type your search term followed by, for example, **site:gov.uk** to get results on mental health from UK government websites.

## Quantity of results

Large: Generating thousands of results can also lead you to settle for the first result you find and rarely look beyond the first page. This is sometimes known as *first-page-itis*.

**Tip:** Use the refine options to reduce the number of results and improve the relevance of your searches. After you’ve done a search, there are a number of quick refine **options** available via the **search tools** button. The **advanced search** tool offers further options, including narrowing your results by language, last update and file type.

## 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.

**Tip:** Sites like Wikipedia are particularly good for finding openly available material. You can follow up on the material listed in the **references/notes**, **further reading** and **external links** sections of articles to find further material.

## Be wary of…

1. **The filter bubble** – if you have a Google account, your search 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.

# Examining Google Scholar

Google Scholar provides a simple way to broadly search for scholarly literature. From one place, you can search across many disciplines and sources including: articles, theses, books, abstracts and so on. Through academic publishers, professional societies, online repositories, universities and other websites.

It is very similar to Google, which makes it very easy to use. However, it doesn’t provide access to everything you might need, so it makes a good starting point for:

* Researching how much information is available on a particular area of interest.
* Quickly locating a specific article title.
* Downloading references as well as full text articles.

Using Google Scholar in combination with the University of Manchester Library’s search function can in some cases provide a useful starting point for relevant material including grey literature.

# Examining Library Search

Library Search is University of Manchester Library’s integrated search facility. It enables you to search all material subscribed to by the Library including **journals**, **databases**, and **special collections**, using a single search box.

If you use the single search box with no limits, you’ll often get a very large number of results. You can use the **filter options to limit the results** to a manageable number or use the **advanced search option** to improve the relevance of your results further. The quality of the results in Library Search also make it the best place to start searching for resources.

A great feature of Library Search is that it allows you to **personalise your search results** by logging in to Library Search and **specifying your subject area**.

Your search terms will then be interpreted in the context of your subject, and your results will be more relevant.

# Examining subject databases

Subject databases **provide access to scholarly material from academic publishers** and specialist information providers. Much of this material will be peer-reviewed, which means it’s been checked by other scholars working in the same field; your tutors will be expecting you to use it in your work. However, **peer review doesn’t always indicate work is of a higher quality** so it’s still important to apply critical analysis when using these sources.

As well as databases specialising in your subject, you can **search other specialist databases** such as those that provide access to related material including: company information, reports and statistics; regional, national and international newspapers; and legal case histories and legislation.

If you learn how to use databases effectively by **planning an appropriate search**, **you will return a good number of relevant results**. However, you should be wary of which and how many you search. 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. You may also find it useful to explore other subject guides when carrying out interdisciplinary research.

# Summary

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

1. Google

Easy to use and great for finding quick answers, but the questionable quality of many of the results means that it shouldn’t be used as the basis for your research.

1. Google Scholar

Just as easy to use as Google, and a great starting point for your research. Be careful not to rely exclusively on it though, as you might miss out on other high-quality relevant resources.

1. Library Search

Another great starting point, especially if you’re looking for books, ebooks and full text articles. It also gives you access to theses, images and archive material held by the library.

1. Subject Databases

Use them to find high-quality academic texts; this is the sort of material your tutors will be looking for. Check your subject guide to find out which databases are most relevant to you.

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