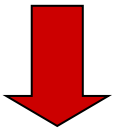
Finding and reading literature

This section covers..

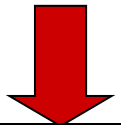
Finding appropriate literature (or the quest for evidence)

Wide and appropriate reading is the key to success in your studies. Finding out how to find appropriate literature to read and use in your assignment is a fundamental skill. The following flow chart will help..

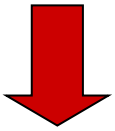
Your assignment guidelines will give you some initial idea of the subject area that you need to explore. Use key words from the guidelines to start to find appropriate literature as background reading. Use a range of sources – books, journals and internet.



As you read the initial literature, firm up or revise your topic and refine your search terms.
Identify the key issues within the topic to help in the planning of your assignment (as in module 3)



Where you are not able to find sufficient literature focused on your topic, use search terms from key issues and / or look for 'parallel literature'. Parallel literature is literature which can be **applied** to your topic but is not directly related. Eg an article on the use of e-learning in secondary education may have some implications for medical education.



At this stage you will have a large amount of literature – perhaps twice as much as you will use in your assignment. It must all be read. As you do, sift your articles into 3 sections..

1. Those which relate directly to your topic
2. Those which would inform your topic
3. Those which are of peripheral interest only

Retain all of type 1, be selective about type 2 and discard most of type 3.

(Back to top)

Selecting quality sources

Not all published literature is of the same standard. In fact, it varies widely and in order to produce academic work of a sufficient standard, you will need to be discerning in your choice of sources.

Books – a good source of background information. Most text books will have gone through a vigorous and lengthy reviewing process to ensure their accuracy and validity. This will make them a reliable source, but because of the length of time this takes, not fully up to date.
In choosing books, look for some indication of the intended readership (ie suitable for academic purposes) and check that you have the latest edition.

Articles – those in professional journals will be an important source for you. They will have been checked for accuracy and validity to varying degrees – look at the journal's front page to see how they vet their publications. Those which use double-blind peer review are usually seen as carrying more authority. There is a hierarchy of those journals considered most authoritative. (Librarians can access 'league tables' if in doubt).
Consider also the type of article – an opinion based article carries less 'weight' than one based on a large research study.

Internet – a potentially valuable source of appropriate literature, but with many pitfalls. In contrast to books and articles, anyone can publish to the internet without any check as to quality and accuracy. Great care needs to be exercised in using internet sources, especially because they are so easily accessed (see section – Selective use of the internet).

Critical reading

In order to demonstrate the ability to 'critically analyse', it is important to be able to read critically. Each source accessed should be subject to an evaluation of its relative worth. This will help you decide how applicable it is to your assignment and also to compare findings with those of other authors. Finding a weaker source may rule out its use, or help you make statements about the relative balance of evidence. For example – if two authors arrive at opposite conclusions, but one is based on a large research project, and the other appears to be based on opinion, then your assignment should make this clear.

Muir Grey (1997) proposed a hierarchy of evidence. It was intended to apply to sources for evidence-based practice in health care but may help inform you as to the relative worth of different types of research.

- Type I – Strong evidence from at least one systematic review of RCTs (Randomised Controlled Trial)
- Type II - Strong evidence from at least one RCT
- Type III – Evidence from other trials
- Type IV – Evidence from multiple non-experimental studies
- Type V – Opinions of respected authorities, descriptive studies or reports from expert committee

Muir Grey M (1997) *Evidence based health care.* London: Churchill Livingstone

You may not always be able to find type I studies (sometimes seen as the "Gold Standard"), but aim to get as high on this hierarchy as possible.

Critiquing an article - In order to make a judgement about the worth of a source, particularly for research based articles, it can help to use a checklist. The following is based on the work of Hawthorn (1983), Bowling (2002),& Rudestam & Newton (2001) and relates closely to the research process. Consider each of the points…

- The researcher(s) – qualifications, background, source of funding
- Literature review – is it up-to-date, balanced and inclusive?
- Aims and objectives – clearly stated. Variables, focus and research question all clear. Any assumptions or bias evident?
- Study design – is it appropriate?
- Population and sample – are they appropriate and representative?
- Data collection – are the instruments appropriate, reliable and valid?
- Data analysis – adequate and appropriate?
- Results – are the stats clearly presented and appropriate?
- Discussion – are the findings clearly reported. Are the conclusions consistent with the results and pertinent to the original aims?
- Ethics – problems considered?
- Limitations – are they acknowledged?
- Implications – what are the practical and theoretical implications of the findings? Where and to what extent does it impact on your study? How does it compare to other papers?

(Back to top)

Selective use of the internet

The internet is a vast resource, but you should bear in mind that the vast majority of websites are unsuitable to use as an academic source. NB Wikipedia is not a good source, so should never be cited in your work.

There is no single way to easily identify good websites. The use of the internet is still relatively new and the protocols will develop eventually. The following guidelines will help you identify those which may be useful…

- Author name and date – if the author hides behind anonymity, then the material may be suspect. You'll need a date to be able to properly reference. Is the author a recognised expert in his field?
- Domain name – restricting your search to certain domains may help find more suitable material. Eg URLs ending .ac.uk are hosted by universities in the UK and .edu by educational establishments in the USA. (www.swansea.ac.uk = Swansea University's website)
- Web design – as a pointer, websites using garish colours and animated gif files (moving images) tend to be less academic.
- Advertisements – a reputable source would not have to rely heavily on advertising and so would avoid over cluttering the site with pop-ups etc.
- Search engines – the more reliable sites may not necessarily be found in a search engines 'top ten' sites. These are either the most popular or those where the owner has paid to put them there – neither indicators of reliability.
- Web based journals – increasingly, professional journals appear on-line and are therefore just as reliable as their paper counterparts.
- Portals – provided by a number of organisations provide links to other sites. They are often selective about the sites they so endorse.

(Back to top)

Sources / Further reading

- Bowling A (2009) *Research Methods in health (3rd Ed)*. Buckingham: OU Press
- Hawthorn P (1983) Principles of research: a checklist. *Nursing Times*. 79(23)
- Muir Grey M (1997) *Evidence based health care*. London: Churchill Livingstone
- Rudestam K & Newton R (2007) *Surviving your dissertation (3rd Ed)*. Thousand Oaks: Sage

(Back to top)