Finding Scholarly Sources

You've probably been told by most of your professors that you need to find "scholarly" or "peer-reviewed" sources for your papers. Likely, you know that to find such sources you need to use a library database. You may even be familiar with databases in your field.

But finding relevant scholarly sources can be tricky, even if you are familiar with the process. Databases are far more specified than standard search engines, and you may need to search multiple library databases to find the number of sources you need. Furthermore, unlike Google, library databases like JSTOR and Academic Search Premier are designed for trained academics rather than the general public; they function best with multiple keyword searches. Finally, articles from library databases are not always immediately available – but this does not mean you shouldn't put the effort into tracking them down!

This handout will give you some tips for navigating these issues when using library databases. Remember, if you are having trouble finding sources on your topic, the UMC librarians will always be happy to help you!

GETTING STARTED

Like with many things, good research takes some preparation. Consider these strategies as you begin your research.

Start early. Many common research problems can be solved with some extra time. Unlike much internet content, peer-reviewed articles are often copyrighted and licensed; the article you need may be behind a paywall or only available as a photocopy. The UMC librarians can almost certainly get you free access to these sources, but content sharing often takes a few days. Start researching early, and this will be less of a problem.

Choose the correct database. Unlike Google, library databases are specialized and subject to various access and copyright laws. Choosing the biggest, broadest database in the library system isn't always the best idea. If you are unfamiliar with the specialized databases in your field, talk to your professor! The library website also offers you the option of organizing its databases by subject – look for the link called "Click here to view Databases by Subject" on the alphabetical list of databases.

Use a variety of keywords: Unlike Google and Siri, scholarly databases value subject knowledge over intuitive operation. Often, typing in synonyms to your original key words will yield different sets of results. For example: "global warming," "climate change," and "greenhouses effect" might each yield a different set of (relevant) results. Your keywords will also need to get more specific as your research advances; in this case, more specified keywords might be "greenhouse gas emissions" or "ocean levels."

Don't get discouraged. If the results you need are not on the first page of the first search that you try, this does not mean there is nothing available on your topic. Instead, change your search terms, switch databases, or just keep looking through the results.

AS YOU SEARCH

Consider the following strategies to help you decide which sources to use, keep your searches from fizzling out, and stay organized as you research.

Use abstracts to decide what to read. Abstracts are there to help you decide whether or not the content of that article will be useful for your research. Use them for this purpose! Just remember that an abstract is not the same as an article; only in rare cases should you quote an abstract in a paper.

Keep an open mind. It's rare that you will stumble on a single source that contains all the information you need on your topic, and even then, you likely want your bibliography to contain more than one source. Even if an article's main argument is not precisely relevant to your paper, there might still be sections or sub-topics that are useful to you. Even articles you disagree with can help you to formulate your own argument, so don't write something off just because it does not match perfectly with your own ideas.

Look at relevant article's bibliographies. This is one of the most effective and time-efficient ways to do your research. Once you find an article that is extra-relevant to your paper/topic, take a look at that person's bibliography! Published scholars will likely be citing the most important and relevant information in their field.

Use the search to find new keywords. Your keyword selection should not remain static as you search. Jot down new keywords that appear in relevant articles, and make a note to try them out.

Keep track of your searches. It's easy to get lost in your search process when using the method above, so take a moment to jot down the search/databases combinations you've already tried. This will help to keep you from repeating work you've already done and/or missing out on obvious combinations.

Keep track of your sources. Keeping 30 tabs open in your browser is any easy way to give yourself a headache. If at all possible, download and save pdfs of your sources (just make sure to clearly name and organize the files). If no pdfs are available, consider copying and pasting the text of the sources into a word document, which can then be saved/printed. If you do keep track of your sources in an unorthodox way, it's helpful to keep track of bibliographic information in a single document. That way, you do not have to stay up the night before your paper is due trying to track down details from one of your sources.

WHEN IN DOUBT…

Remember that research is a process. Research is not cut-and-dry. You will likely find that you need more or different information as you begin writing your paper. It's okay to go back to databases with different keywords or use different databases altogether. Remember: it is usually more frustrating to force irrelevant sources into your paper than it is to find a new source or two.

Talk to a librarian. Librarians literally study research. They would like nothing more than to help you find sources on your topic. Asking a librarian directly is also likely to give you easier access to the information you do find.