Making the most of your library

Traditionally, libraries were seen as a collection of books, whether publicly available or privately held.

With the information revolution, however, libraries are increasingly being redefined, according to Wikipedia, as ‘places to get unrestricted access to information in many formats and from many sources’.

In academic institutions, libraries are places which store the information you will need for any academic purpose, whether a first-year college essay or a PhD thesis. This information may be in physical form, i.e., a collection of books, journals, CDs, DVDs, etc., or it may be retrievable virtually either by downloading the resource onto a PC or by linking to another database of resources.

If you are overawed by the number of books in your library, imagine it as unlocking the key to an infinite number of other resources in cyberspace! Sounds daunting, I know, but efficient use of your library will pay dividends in terms of the speed at which you are able to access relevant resources, and should therefore lead to better marks and an improved student experience.

Getting to know your library

As soon as you can familiarize yourself with your library, the better. Before you set off:

- Some institutions have different ‘branches’ of the library on different campuses, and you need to make sure that you have the right one with the relevant collections for your subject area.

- You may well need your student number and identity card in order to join, so be sure to have these with you on your first visit.

You can probably find out quite a lot about your library from its website, which you should study (and bookmark). But it’s also important to visit in person, in order to get an idea of the layout, how the collections are arranged, where your specific subject resources are found, what are the arrangements for study, etc.

If you have not visited a library in a while, you may well be surprised at the extent of the resources and facilities: photocopiers, printing, laminating and binding facilities, areas for group study as well as silent areas, computers (sometimes in special rooms), equipment for making audio-visual presentations, video players – all that on top of acres of books and journals!

If you have special needs, there may be collections in Braille, assistive equipment, or a designated study area.

- How many items can you take out at a time, and for how long?
- What are the arrangements for reserving books, ditto for renewing? Can you do this by telephone?
- What is the policy on fines, and is there a waiver if you have special needs?
- What if your library hasn’t got the book or article you want, for example can it help with interlibrary loans?
- What is the system for photocopying, what is the cost per page and do you need a card?
- How much you can do online? For example can you view the catalogue, reserve and renew books, check your records etc., save searches, and set up email searches when new items matching the search are added to the collection? (Online systems vary but most contain the above features.)
- What are the arrangements for induction, and will the staff provide specific training? Some libraries provide online tutorials.
Make good use of library staff – they are trained information experts who possess not only knowledge of their collections but also skills in searching and retrieving a wide range of information. There may well be a librarian allocated to your subject, who will know a lot about the specific collections in that area.

Finally, and particularly if you are bewildered by the vast amount of material available online, your library may help you navigate this by means of specific Subject Guides (see below).

Finding your way around the catalogue

The catalogue is a collection of records of what is held in that particular library. You may well also be able to access it online, via the Internet. Each individual catalogue record contains two different sorts of information:

Bibliographic:
- Author
- Title of work
- Publication date
- Type of material

Item:
- Location
- Classmark
- Status (on loan, reference etc.)
- In the case of an electronic resource, connection information often in the form of a specific link to the resource

When you search a particular record, your library’s catalogue system will allow you a range of choices, such as author, title, and keyword (word which describes your area of interest). It may also allow you to organize the search in specific ways.

When you get your search results, you may well find more than one entry matches your criteria, if so the link to the record should be live so that you should be able to find out more information. You may also be able to save the search.

The classmark is a specific catalogue or call number with letters and numbers which identifies the physical location of the item, and is based on a specific classification of knowledge. Famous classification types are the Library of Congress classification outline and the Dewey system.

Check your reading lists, and look up some of the books in the library. Make a note of specific numbers that relate to parts of your course. Find where in the library they are located and browse the shelves: do you see other resources on the same subject that might come in useful?

Finally, your library may also contain catalogue records of other collections, for example the ULRLS catalogue combines records of all the libraries at the centre of London University. It may also provide access to national or specialist collections, such as the Library of Congress, British Library etc.

Types of resources

The following is some brief information about some of the types of resource found in libraries, and how to search for them.
Books

Why use?
Provide in-depth information about a subject.

How to search
By author, title, keyword etc. This will provide a classification number which will tell you the physical location.

Need to check
That it’s reasonably up-to-date, from a reputable author (you would probably need to check this with your tutor). If there are a number of different editions, check that you have the most recent.

Journals

Why use?
If the journal has been peer reviewed (two or more experts read each article), it will have an academic seal of approval; journals are more likely to contain the latest research.

By journal title. If the journal title is abbreviated, try Journal Abbreviation Sources.

How to search
If you don’t have complete bibliographic information, search a journals index database such as Ingenta, which will bring up journal article titles in the results.

If you don’t have complete bibliographic information, search a journals index database such as Ingenta, which will bring up journal article titles in the results.

Theses

Why use?
They contain original, in depth and advanced research.

If you know the awarding institution, search its library; otherwise, try a national collection such as the British Library, or Proquest, which contains references to theses from North America.

Primary sources

Why use?
These are news reports, official publications, company annual reports, archive material, grey literature (literature issued for non commercial purposes, by businesses, pressure groups etc.), for example newsletters, brochures etc. They may constitute important primary research for your topic, as they provide first hand information about an organization, news reports etc.

How to search
These are more difficult to source and are usually found through specific databases (see below).

Electronic resources

Why use?
There are a vast range of electronic resources including websites, electronic journals and books, CD-ROMs, databases etc. Some collections of e journals and databases etc. will not be freely available but your library will have paid a subscription which entitles members to their use.

By title, keyword etc. In the case of electronic journals, look up the title in the catalogue or there may be a list of journals on the library web pages. Instead of a catalogue/call number indicating a specific location, there will probably be a link to the resource.

Need to check
Electronic resources fall into two categories; those that have been expertly checked, and those which have not. E journals may be electronic versions of the
printed journal but with added search facilities; if not, make sure that they have been expertly checked and are not just a forum for anyone to have a say. A lot of information is freely available on the web, but you need to make sure you know how to evaluate it: your library may have a tutorial on this or it may provide lists of websites by subject.

Online research tools

Libraries no longer just house physical collections but have also carved inroads in cyberspace and through sophisticated databases provide vast digital collections. Such digital collections represent an attempt to make the web intelligent – most have been put together by experts and peer reviewed. They are essentially tertiary rather than primary and secondary resources – research tools that link to other resources.

Electronic tools can appear daunting but nevertheless you need to come to grips with them if you are involved in academic study. There are some solid advantages to their use – you don’t have a set loan period, and you can often access them from your computer at home! Many different words are used – indexes, abstracts, bibliographies, databases, gateways, portals – and here is an introduction to the most common.

Databases

These are searchable collections of material, and could be described as organized search engines – in other words, the information has been specially chosen and organized.

**Bibliographic databases** – These can be either general or subject-based. An example is EconLit, which has indexes and abstracts of over 600 Economics journals. They can be searched by article title, author, journal, keyword etc., and they normally have a short piece of information (abstract) about the item concerned.

**Fulltext databases** – These are organized collections of material; similar to indexes and abstracts, they also provide the full text of the article. The Emerald Fulltext database is a complete collection of all Emerald’s journals and includes more than 85,000 articles. Databases often have quite sophisticated search and retrieval mechanisms as well as the facility to save searches, and receive e-mail alerts based on similarity to previous search criteria.

Gateways

These are directories of online resources which have been specifically vetted, selected and organized by experts according to category. An example of a portal is SOSIG – Social Science Information Gateway. The section on business and management links to selection of resources, each of which has been evaluated and categorised by subject specialists based at UK universities.

Gateways can of course be accessed directly, and do not usually require a subscription, but your library may well have a list on its web page, organized according to subject. Like databases, they often have very sophisticated search tools.

Indexes/directories

These provide lists of web pages, organized by subject, but are not vetted for quality.

Search engines
These search the web using software tools – usually only part so you need to use a metasearch engine so access more than one.

Current awareness tools

If you are doing a large research project you will need to access these - they carry details on everything that is active in a particular area. Some allow you to search research in progress, others unpublished and pre-print papers.

Some resources will be accessible only by library subscription and you will need particular pass words; the subscription may be unique to the library premises, but more and more libraries are making arrangements for students to use from home. In the United Kingdom, for example, Athens (for which you will need a user name and password) can facilitate off-campus access.