

# THE LITERATURE SURVEY



Time spent developing your research skills is never time wasted: it is an investment in your future.

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## **Why Bother with a Literature Survey?**

You will never be able to complete a really good piece of writing without adequately researching the subject. And you cannot expect to become a good researcher unless you learn how to do a Literature Survey.

A Literature Survey enables you to locate everything in print about your chosen topic. Investing time and energy in acquiring this knowledge to carry through into your writing is essential. Knowing how to do a Literature Survey enables you to take control of your research, developing your knowledge as new 'live' issues come up.

It is also worth learning about this because it is a valuable transferrable skill which you can take with you into the world of work, into your writing and into most aspects of the rest of your life. Who can say when you will want to know and perhaps write about skiing resorts, blue cheese production in Vietnam, scuba diving in Cuba, Vampire-Romance hybrid novels or the history of Derby Arboretum?

People usually get interested in a topic because of something they have read. At first this leads to footnotes and references, then to the Bibliography at the end of the book or dissertation. But books rarely contain a comprehensive collection of all relevant sources materials. Another approach is to use the University Library to see what it contains. But while this approach yields books, it may not reveal articles in journals, magazines and newspapers.

Really you want to know that you have read just about everything relevant to your subject – certainly all the classic literature and probably the most recent publications too. However, in practice, unless you have a very narrow topic to research, reading everything, or even most of the relevant literature, is just impossible. Either you never stop reading and start writing, or just give up altogether.

What you want is a system that you can rely on to track down information on your topic that is significant, relevant and substantial. Following your nose or honing your instinct may be a good start, but after that it is just hit-and-miss. The main point of doing a literature search is that it reduces the element of luck. There is no substitute for grasping the nettle and conducting a literature search.

## **Key Search Words**

The basis of a systematic literature search is the use of Key Words. Once you have done some basic reading around your topic you will be able to think of 6-10 Key Words that convey the main points about it. You can use these Key Words to comb through indexes, abstracts, bibliographies and databases for useful relevant material.

For example, if you wanted to find out about the Polish Renaissance Poet, Jan Kochanowski you could work your way through the following Key Words: Jan Kochanowski, Renaissance, Humanism, Polish Nobility, *szlachta*, Poetry, Poland.

If you wanted to research Urban Renewal you could use: inner city, employment, enterprise zones, science parks, enterprise agencies, docklands, development corporations, model cities or service sector. Research on most topics in Literature,

the Humanities and Social Sciences can be managed in this way. And of course if you know a specialist author in the field you can put in their name too.

If your topic is quite tightly defined, like the National Front, or football violence, or left-wing parties in the EU, you need to work out your list of Key Words so that it does not produce so much information on the edge of your topic that you never get around to reading the essential materials.

The use of Key Words applies equally to online research and to research in a paper-based archive. Google and various other Search Engines on the internet have made this much easier in recent years. You can use Key Words to search for books, pamphlets, government documents, unpublished theses.

Whether you are using paper-based archives or online materials, the use of Key Words is the standard basic bibliographical search-tool.

### **Paper-based Archive Research**

There are a great many paper-based archives that may be useful – though many of them are working at digitising their holdings. For example, you can search:

(i)

The British National Bibliography (BNB) lists every new book pamphlet, paper and research document published, and is revised cumulatively on an annual basis. It has an author index which enables you to track down the works of a particular author, and a subject index, which allows you to use key words to identify publications on topics in your area.

Often the starting point for students in Humanities and Social Sciences is the British Humanities Index, which includes Abstracts and Indexes of Journals.

Another useful starting point is the Directory of Online Databases.

(ii)

There are a growing number of abstracts and indexes, and really the only way you can find the ones that will be most useful for you is to spend a couple of hours each day for a couple of weeks browsing through them. You can do this online in many cases, but also you can find several of these in printed form in the Classified Reference section of most university libraries. For the most part you can ignore publications like *Genetics Abstracts* or *Potato Abstracts* – unless they are exactly what you are looking for!

For Arts / Humanities students it is always a good idea to think across disciplines too. So for example, the *Social Science Index* contains a great deal of information on Geography, Politics, Planning and Policy Making – many of which have implications for Arts and Humanities research. *Energy Research Abstracts* has much more than just energy topics in it and now covers a great many green issues. *Voluntary Forum Abstracts*, for example is good on community issues, but also has material on inner-cities, self-help and volunteering and if you search carefully you will find material relevant to writing. Don't restrict yourself to just one Abstract Index: you will often find

that in different ways and with different emphases two or three separate indexes cover the topic that interests you.

In all cases it is a good idea to read the introduction to the latest issue of the Abstract and its Index to get at the range of materials, topics and subjects covered, and, of course to work out under what headings the material you want might appear. For example, say you wanted something on Corporatism in the UK, should you begin looking under C, or would it come under B for British Corporatism, or G for Great Britain (Corporatism), or U for UK Corporatism?

(iii)

Government Publications, Parliamentary reports, Reports of Environmental Policy, Committee Reports, White Papers on Legislation, HMSO Official Publications on a surprising range of subjects from ecology to literature and the arts. Most of these can be found in *HMSO Official Publications*, which is produced daily, weekly and monthly and then cumulatively in the *HMSO Annual Catalogue* with an index. There is also *British Official Publications (Not Published by HMSO)* - and yes, weird though it is that is the actual title.

(iv)

There are also publications like *Index to Theses* and *Research in British Universities* which enable you to locate materials that may not have been published.

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The main point of learning how to do a Literature Survey is to develop skills in using libraries, databases and sources of information for basic information and bibliographical purposes. It is a skill which includes:

- knowing where to look and how to get hold of material when you need it, and
- making the best of the situation by working out the processes and short-cuts that will speed up delivery.

The key to a Literature Survey is to make yourself familiar with you nearest library and its facilities. So set yourself the task of finding out:

- what your university library holds on your chosen topic
- what is available in other nearby libraries – for example, Nottingham, Sheffield, Leicester, Manchester
- what is available elsewhere and from non-library sources.

Since the late 1980s the World Wide Web has enhanced the ease of information retrieval to a remarkable degree. It is possible to do a much of the work involved in a literature search without leaving the comfort of the home. But still, it is not possible to do a thorough literature search without spending some time among the library shelves reading actual books.

### **Electronic Searching**

By plugging into specific electronic data-bases it is possible to access Databases like: Counter-Terrorism Intelligence Reports; Politics Online (USA); International Politics and Current Events; Political Documentation (mainly German Material); SAGA (French political materials); the old GLC archive at Acompline; CSAD (EU

publications); POLIS – Parliamentary Online Service including the Index to *Hansard*, *Hansard*, HMSO Publications, House of Commons Library materials, and the *HMSO Annual Catalogue* going back to 1976.

Sadly, however, information is power: it costs money to accumulate, categorise, store and make this information available to you, so you may be asked to pay for access to some of these information databases.

## **Conclusion**

- The basis of good writing is often good research, and the basis of good research is a Literature Survey of the kind outlined here. Completing a Literature Survey requires the three p's: planning, patience and persistence.
- The idea of a Literature Surveys is huge and it varies slightly in detail from subject to subject, from topic to topic, from project to project.
- It is important to spend time browsing in order to familiarise yourself with what is out there and what is available.
- *Keesing's Archives* and *The Times Index* are good places to start, and very useful if you need to construct a sequence of historical events as both publications record world events.
- Always be prepared to ask the Librarians for advice. They can often suggest short cuts and alternative routes to the information you want.
- Talk to class-mates and swap information and ideas. If two or three people are working on related topics they may come up with sources you have not yet found.
- When you start your Literature Survey remember to keep a careful record of what you have consulted – e.g. if you are looking through back numbers of a magazine note the years and the issues you have consulted as well as the details of articles that interest you. This is not something you can do quickly, but it is something that must be done thoroughly and methodically.
- Keeping a file full of bits of paper, scraps, torn out pages, even notes on a computer etc. is just an invitation to disaster.
- Create your own information filing system. Some people keep a box of cards (5x3 or 6x4) with references, quotations, bibliographical entries (author, title, publisher, place, date, page ref. etc.)
- If you keep your notes on a computer be sure to back-up everything with copies on a memory stick or external hard-drive.
- Develop your own approach and adapt this advice to your own individual needs.
- Remember, time spent learning and time spent developing your research skills, is not time wasted: it is an investment in your future.