INSIDE TRACK

ACADEMIC RESEARCH, WRITING & REFERENCING

MARY DEANE

ACADEMIC RESEARCH, WRITING AND REFERENCING

3 LOCATING SOURCES

This chapter stresses the importance of searching for sources systematically and invites you to consider the relevance, ready availability, and reliability of materials in relation to your topic. It also provides tips on effective time management as you search the literature in your subject area.

The chapter covers:

- **Systematic searching for sources**
- **The relevance of sources**
- **The ready availability of sources**
- **The reliability of sources**
- **Literature searches**
- **Using your university library**
- **Moving from general to specific research.**

Using this chapter

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 2 offered tips on avoiding plagiarism; Chapter 3 now highlights the need for a system to search for the sources you will use in your writing. It stresses the importance of understanding your purpose for writing and explains how to move from seeking general sources to finding specifically relevant materials.

A SYSTEM FOR SEARCHING

Although your approach will differ based on the purpose of each writing task, you can develop a system for locating potentially useful sources that is adaptable to each assignment (Hacker 2006: 6, Lunsford 2008: 258).

Sources should be:

- Relevant
- Readily available
- Reliable.

Relevance

The relevance of sources depends upon the content, style, author, and intended audience (Lunsford 2008: 252). The clearer you are about the aim, style, and format of your own work, the better equipped you will be to find the right kinds of texts for your purpose. Do not neglect to search for numerical data and images if these are also relevant. Begin your systematic approach to locating the right sources for your task by thinking about these three questions:

1 What is the scope of the source?
2 Is this relevant to my writing?
3 Should I just make a record of this source (using a referencing management system, on paper, or on file) and move on?

Readily available

Once you have learnt how to use the catalogue, databases, and resources readily available via your university library you will not be dependent upon the internet, which is only one way to access materials and will not necessarily yield relevant sources for your purpose (Hacker 2006: 10). The next phase in your systematic approach to searching for sources is to consider these three questions:

1 Is there a paper-based copy in my university library?
2 Do I need to order the source from another library or collection?
3 Is there a digital copy accessible via my university library website using the catalogue, databases, or search engines?

Reliability

Sources are reliable if they are accurate, well designed, and written by authors with the right credentials for your purpose (Hacker 2006: 23). Mostly you will need to refer to scholarly sources for your academic writing, so the material you select should be based on valid research. It is often preferable to consult peer-reviewed sources because they have been verified by experts in the field. The third stage in your systematic approach to searching is to address these questions:

1 Is the information in the source confirmed elsewhere?

2 Is the author qualified to produce the source?

3 Is the source intended for academic use?

Peer review

Peer review is a process designed to ensure the quality, reliability, and originality of published material. Tutors often expect you to locate sources that have been peer-reviewed, which means that expert readers evaluate material and provide feedback on the areas requiring improvement, expansion, or revision. Blind peer review is when feedback is supplied anonymously and this is considered to be a more rigorous form of assessment.

If you are not sure whether sources have been peer-reviewed you can ask for advice at your university library or consult your tutors. The challenge of accessing sources online is that sources distributed via this digital environment do not always undergo peer review, and consequently they can be poorly phrased, badly organised or inaccurate. Therefore, do not rely exclusively on sources you have accessed online and instead research scholarly materials which have been assessed by experts and identified as reliable for academic use (Hacker 2006: 24–6).

RELEVANT SOURCES

When you receive an assignment brief or writing project, one of your first tasks is to analyse the requirements and begin to search for sources to help you fulfil your brief. It is often necessary to do independent research, and most often you will not be able to carry out the task successfully without drawing on existing knowledge. As discussed in the next chapter, your use of sources must be documented fully to avoid unintentional plagiarism.

Researching existing ideas can help you to formulate your own perspective on a subject, which will contribute to making your academic writing original. In most contexts this quality is highly valued, so enhancing the innovative nature of your work could improve your performance. However, originality is an often misunderstood term and is not as demanding as it may appear because, although your tutors expect a fresh engagement with topics from each student, they are aware of the constraints

of time and experience. So, in practice and especially at undergraduate level, originality is achieved mainly through original research, which helps writers identify fresh angles on their topics.

Researching existing ideas can also give you the authority to deal with a subject effectively, because the more you know about a topic the more confident your treatment of it will be. Writers who are unclear about important issues are unlikely to organise their material well, which will have a negative impact on the quality of their writing. If you have a strong understanding of a particular topic you will be in the best position to identify the most cogent points to include or debate, which means that you will not include irrelevant data which disrupts the flow of ideas. Effective research will help you to gain clarity about the ideas and information you are discussing – this can improve your written expression to create an impression of professionalism and mastery of your material.

Keep focused on your deadline

Whilst research is usually essential to effective academic writing it is also vital to limit the time you spend locating sources so that you can maximise the time available for assessing, reading critically, and integrating sources into your assignments. The three-stage process outlined below offers tips on being efficient and effective as you gather information before you start to write. However, this is just one approach to research and you should adapt it to suit your own style as a scholar.

Collect together all the guidance you have received from your tutor about producing your piece of writing. This may include the assignment brief, the module handbook, and notes from lectures or seminars. Tutors often put coursework guidelines on the module web, so, if relevant, have a look at this. The earlier you gather these guidelines, the better your chances will be of getting support about issues you do not understand.

Here are five important questions to ask yourself when you are analysing the purpose of your writing in order to locate appropriate sources:

1 **Who is the main audience for this piece of writing? (For instance, subject specialists)**
2 **What information should I assume this readership already knows? (I will not need to explain this in my writing)**
3 **What do I already know? (From lecture notes, readings, experience)**
4 **What background information do I need to acquire? (This should be presented in a concise way early in my writing)**
5 **Which key terms, concepts, or theories do I need to research? (Do I need advice about these?)**

Find the right sources for your purpose

Jot down your answers to these five questions and take your notes to the library when you go to research or keep them with you as you go online to find appropriate

databases via the library website. The advantage of visiting the library in person is that you may be able to speak to a library specialist on duty, who can help you to locate the best sources for your purpose.

Work with others to find suitable sources

Discuss the kinds of sources you might use with others who are studying your subject, either by chatting in person or corresponding online. Although it would be plagiarism to copy another person's work, it is good practice to search for information together, as long as you generate your own ideas for writing about the sources you find.

You could develop a joint plan for locating sources with a friend and divide the task between you; for example, if you need to investigate several theories you could research one each and report back about your findings at an agreed time, but remember to read key sources for yourself and acknowledge them in your writing. Supporting each other will make the research process more efficient and enjoyable, so collaborate with colleagues to locate information for your projects.

Begin with what you know

The aim of the lectures and other teaching sessions on your course is to prepare you for producing the written assessments, so if you have attended these regularly you should have some relevant knowledge before you begin writing an assignment. Try to take full notes when you attend any kind of class and keep these safe as a starting point for your writing projects. Begin by re-reading your notes and the handouts you received before you start to write, and jot down important points or ideas sparked by reviewing this information. Your tutors will probably provide tips about useful sources, which will be good starting points for your research.

If you find yourself in a situation where your knowledge about a topic is limited or you were unable to attend all the relevant classes, you can take some useful steps to gather together information. First, look on your module web if this is relevant and download any advice that is available about the writing you have to do. Secondly, as soon as possible contact your module tutor to make an appointment to attend at an office hour or at another suitable time. Do some preparation for this meeting, such as reading your assignment brief and making a list of questions about issues you find confusing. You could also attempt to make a plan for your writing and take this along to seek advice, or draw up a shortlist of possible sources and ask whether you have missed anything important. Thirdly, contact a classmate and ask for some tips on understanding the assignment and locating relevant sources. You could offer to help in return by reading your classmate's draft and offering constructive feedback. Or you could offer to report back on sources you locate which could be mutually useful, but be clear that you do not wish to copy or allow your classmate to copy your work.

READILY AVAILABLE SOURCES

With a little effort you can expand the range of sources which are readily available to you by using your university library's catalogue to locate a diversity of online and paper-based resources (Hacker 2006: 9).

Literature searches

Using the tips below and keeping in mind the need to be systematic, learn how to search for the literature you need for your writing. You should consult a range of different types of sources, including books, journal articles, magazines, reference works, and audiovisual sources. Although much of the source material you need is available digitally, it can be helpful to locate paper-based sources, and do not neglect the older materials and seminal works in your field because they can give you a useful grounding in your subject area.

Library catalogue

Library catalogues are gateways to a wealth of sources produced for academic audiences, and without exploiting this access to scholarly materials you cannot fulfil the central requirements of advanced level study to read widely and research independently. Although most library catalogues are intuitive to use you will benefit from attending training sessions, or reading the self-help guides available in your library and usually also downloadable from the library website.

Databases

Databases are repositories of such extensive information that they can be daunting at first, but the time you invest in learning how to use them may yield the best returns of any skill you master at university. Students who avoid databases do themselves an injustice because they shut the door on the richest selection of relevant, reliable, and readily available materials there is (Hacker 2006: 9).

Training in how to navigate around databases and use them efficiently is available at every university library, either as part of an induction programme or on request. The advantage of seeking individual training from a library specialist is that you can ask about the databases most relevant for your discipline or research project. If possible, make an appointment with a subject specialist who will give you inside information on the best places to start your search for information. As you spend time learning how to use databases you will develop your own expertise about their usefulness for different types of writing. Some databases provide access to a broad range of articles and books and these can be helpful as you begin to search, while others focus on discipline-based topics and are invaluable when you narrow down a topic for your writing.