Searching for information for your assignment

Finding material

First you need to do is to find out what resources are available to support the question you have been set.

The best way to do this is to Google your topic to get a broad overview. Next

- Pick out some keywords in the question to search in Summon and Google.

This will help you

- Find out what information and resources there are (have you found enough, too little or too much information?)

If this happens, go back to your question and choose different keywords to search. You may need to do this several times in order to get a clear picture of what resources are available. If you aren’t sure about the sort of key words to use in a search you can ask your librarian for help.

If you are using electronic resources you might also want to using connector words like AND, OR and NOT to develop your search. These are known as Boolean operators. Using Boolean operators will make your searches much more powerful but it can be a little tricky to know the best way to use these when you first start. Have a look at the Boolean Machine (http://rockwellschrock.com/rbs3k/boolean/) for some advice on how the operators work. If, after trying some searches with Boolean operators, you are still having problems finding the type of information you want, ask your subject librarian for help.

Is it the right material?

Once you are sure you have found enough resources, start to look at the text of the information you have found and decide whether it supports the argument you want to make. Remember that what counts as "enough information" may vary from topic to topic, or, from one assignment to the next.

To help you decide whether the information you have found is useful you can use some simple evaluation criteria.

Ask yourself three things:

- Is it relevant enough to your topic, in other words is it right on point or does it just mention your topic in passing?
• Is it reliable, that is, is it published by a reputable individual or organisation?
• Is it up-to-date, in other words does it reflect current thinking on your topic?

**How do I decide which books to read?**
In all of our libraries there are over 300,000 books to choose from! So, how do you decide which books are right for you? In short, it is down to you to evaluate a book but here are a few things to look for.

• **Scope** - What is the purpose of the book - education, advertising, entertainment?
• **Breadth** - What aspects of the subject are covered? Is the book focused on a narrow area or does it include related topics? For example, does it cover all English and Welsh law or just contract law?
• **Depth** - What is the level of detail provided about the subject? This may depend on the kind of audience for which the resource has been designed. The book could be aimed at A Level, undergraduate or postgraduate students for example.
• **Content** - Is the information fact or opinion?
• **Sources** - Are sources within the book listed so they can be verified?
• **Authority** - What is the authority, expertise or credentials of the author?
• **Currency** - When was the book last revised? This may give an indication of how up to date the book is.

**What type of information will help me give a good answer in my assignment?**
When deciding what is the most appropriate type of information for a particular assignment there are a few things you need to consider:

• Primary v secondary sources
• Scholarly v General Interest
• Current v historical
• Factual/statistical information. This can be useful in providing evidence to back up argument.

Remember that the same type of information may not be relevant for every assignment – it may depend on the topic and what you have been asked to do by your tutor as to which type of information you need to look at.

**Primary sources** could be considered as "original" or "firsthand" sources.

• Journal articles, reports and conference papers which present the results of original research are termed primary literature whether they’re in print or electronic format.
• Sets of data such as statistics and lab results are also primary sources as are documents produced at the time of an event e.g. diaries, photographs, court records, newspaper reports.

**Secondary sources** interpret, analyse or repackage primary material.
• Examples of secondary sources are textbooks and review articles. These aim to summarise and explain previously published work rather than present the results of original work.

Make sure the information found fits your assignment, whether the information you have is a book from a reading list, a journal article, a newspaper article or someone’s web page you need to treat each with the same amount of caution when you use it.

**Quick check**
Ask yourself:
• Is it relevant to the question I need to answer,
• Who wrote the piece,
• Who published it,
• Where did they get their information or data from,
• Is the data up to date,
• Is the work itself up-to-date,
• Is it referenced, that is, has the author said where they obtained the information from,
• Is it well written,
• Who is it written for,
• Is it plausible,
• Do you think your tutor would think it is a sound piece of information?

For books (especially books on a reading list) this should be easy because they are published, well referenced and often recommended by a respected individual like a tutor or a librarian. It is not so easy for e-resources, especially web pages.

If you need help, come and see your subject librarian to get more help.

**Contact us**

**For an appointment or further advice:**
**Phone:** 01785 295750  
**Email:** ask@staffs.ac.uk  
**Visit:** Skills Spaces: Thompson Library, Stoke **OR** Blackheath Lane, Stafford

Additional resources are available the website at: [http://libguides.staffs.ac.uk/AcademicSkills](http://libguides.staffs.ac.uk/AcademicSkills)

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