

# When I Google search for references I keep coming up with basic Wikipedia info and irrelevant websites. How do I find better sources? Help!

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*If your literature searches are returning results that are not relevant, of questionable quality, or just plain dodgy, it's time to get serious and up your search skills. Here's how to up your game and find better references in less time.*

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It's not difficult to turn random catalogue or web searches into tactical information assaults.

Use the following rules of thumb to improve your search results—fast:

- Understand how to identify quality sources upfront
- Develop a list of rock-solid keywords
- Make your keywords work harder for you
- Try citation surfing
- Check subject headings
- Be a bibliographic detective!

There's no time to waste - let's get started.

## Identify quality sources upfront

Use the following rules of thumb to evaluate the quality of a website or other source and determine whether it is valid and appropriate to use for academic study:

Relevance: Is the information relevant to your topic?

Accuracy: Is the information accurate? Is it detailed?

Credibility / Authority: Who is the author, and what are his or her credentials and reputation? Does the site provide contact details? For websites, sites with .org or .gov or .edu addresses are generally best to use. It's important to [understand the parts of a URL](#).

Currency: Is the information current and up to date? Remember that the latest information may not be the most authoritative or comprehensive.

Objectivity: Who is the information aimed at? Is it scholarly or peer reviewed? Who paid for it? Is it biased; does it reflect the interests of particular groups? (To understand vested interests, consider a possible selection of research studies that could be funded about a proposed land development in a rural area by a mining company, a farmer's cooperative, a public housing association, and a conservation lobby group).

Self-test your web evaluation skills!

How trustworthy do you think the following sites and sources are? Why...?

1. Help Save the Endangered Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus: <http://zapatopi.net/treeoctopus/>
2. Giant Gippsland Earthworm – ‘Nature’s Plough’: <http://www.landcarevic.net.au/ftla/documents/land-for-wildlife-news/newsletter/LFW%20Land%20for%20Wildlife%20Note%20No.%2011%20%20July%201991.pdf/view>
3. The Age of the Megafauna: <http://www.abc.net.au/science/ozfossil/megafauna/fauna/>
4. Humans Behind Megafauna Extinction: Not Climate Change: <http://www.cfzaustralia.com/2012/03/humans-behind-megafauna-extinction-not.html>

## Develop a list of search keywords

The first step is to identify two or three keywords to use as your main search terms. To identify relevant keywords:

1. Look at your assignment topic or research question and identify the essential nouns and verbs.

E.g. The subject ABPL 30050 Modern Architecture: MoMo to PoMo has previously included the following essay question:

Le Corbusier formulated an architectural theory that included his ‘five points of architecture’. Explain each of these points. Did Le Corbusier apply this theory consistently throughout his architectural career? Compare his designs from the 1920s with those of the 1950s.

The same question, with potential keywords highlighted:

Le Corbusier formulated an architectural theory that included his ‘five points of architecture’. Explain each of these points. Did Le Corbusier apply this theory consistently throughout his architectural career? Compare his designs from the 1920s with those of the 1950s.

A list of possible search queries constructed using the keywords generated above:

“Le Corbusier” architectur\* theory

Corbusier “five points” application

Corbusier architectur\* career

Corbusier design\* 1920 – 1950

2. If you use a textbook in your subject, what is it called? Try searching with keywords from the textbook title.

E.g. The subject UNIB30005 Living Longer: A Global Diagnosis uses the following textbook:

James C Riley (2001) *Rising Life Expectancy: a global history* (Cambridge University Press)

The same text, with possible keywords highlighted:

James C Riley (2001) **Rising Life Expectancy: a global history** (Cambridge University Press)

A list of possible search queries, based on the keywords identified above, and extending the keywords to include related terms:

"life expectancy" (rising or growing)

history of life expectancy

decreasing mortality worldwide

global health outcomes

3. Look at your lecture notes, or look up any lecture notes or handouts provided on LMS or in class. Do these notes contain specialist or technical terms that are relevant to your search?

E.g. In the subject BIOL10004 Biology of Cells and Organisms, Lectures 2 and 3 introduce "Prokaryotic" and "Eukaryotic" cells.

Writing an essay about environmental management? Don't just put the words "environmental management" in your preferred search engine or library database. Try searching with related terms, like "environmental impact" and "environmental monitoring". Enclosing search terms in quotes searches for a specific phrase (returning results that contain the phrase "environmental management", as opposed to results that contain the individual words "environmental" and "management").

Try searching using different versions of the same keyword stem: e.g. for the search terms "environmental" and "management", try: "environment", "environments", "environmentally"; "manage", "managing", "managed".

Tip! Don't forget spelling variants, e.g. "organize" (U.S. English) vs "organise" (British English).

Tip! To search using different versions of the same keyword stem, type in the word stem followed by an asterisk: e.g. "environment\*". This will give you results showing all of the variations of the word "environment".

Search smarter: Use an expanded keyword list

Be alert to search terms that are related to your key concept, but use quite different word combinations: e.g. for searches related to environmental management, you might try "sustainable development" or "natural resource management". If you don't use any related terms, you will definitely miss out on important references.

How to develop an expanded list of search keywords? A simple way is to brainstorm all the related terms you can think of, and then try out a few searches using those terms to see what you get. Visual thinker? Try using a [mind map](#) to link different search terms, to see how they are related conceptually.

Another good way to expand your keyword list is to enter basic search terms into the Library catalogue, pick a result, and scroll down to the "Subject" entry in the catalogue entry, to see what kinds of topics that result has been filed under by librarians.

## Search techniques in action: using formal subject headings to locate related topics

Let's say you're a Physics student searching for introductory level works on black holes. Entering the search keywords "black holes introduction" into the Library catalogue gives a list of results that starts with the following work:

Chow, Tai L. Gravity, black holes, and the very early universe [electronic resource]: an introduction to general relativity and cosmology. New York : Springer, 2008. [\[Permalink to the catalogue entry\]](#)

Bazinga! Click on the result and scroll straight down to the Subject entry:

Subject:        Gravitation.  
                  General relativity (Physics)  
                  Black holes (Astronomy)  
                  Quantum field theory.  
                  Cosmology.

So this one reference can be discovered and sorted using any of those five different subject headings. Some of the subject headings used are broader in scope than just "black holes", some are related specialisations, but all of them are relevant to the topic. Using those related subject headings as keywords in further searches will give you access to more relevant results.

You'll also notice that, for this particular catalogue entry, each of these five Subject headings is a clickable link. Clicking on a subject heading link will lead you to a further list of subject headings that point to both broader (more general) and narrower (more specialist) works in the field (and also shows you how many works the Library has for each of those classifications):

Black Hole of Calcutta Incident, Calcutta, India, 1756 -- See Black Hole Incident, Calcutta, India, 1756

Black holes (Astronomy) -- See also the narrower term Kerr black holes

Black holes (Astronomy)

Black holes (Astronomy) -- Bibliography.

Black holes (Astronomy) -- Computer programs.

Black holes (Astronomy) -- Congresses.

Black holes (Astronomy) -- Fiction.

Black holes (Astronomy) -- Juvenile literature.

Black holes (Astronomy) -- Mathematical models.

Checking subject headings will help you avoid wasting time on completely irrelevant search results (e.g. for a physics assignment, anything related to the Black Hole of Calcutta, or novels involving black holes). It would also help you if you were specifically looking for narrower topics like mathematical techniques for modelling black holes.

## Citation surfing

'Citation surfing' involves checking a reading list or a bibliography to find references, then locating a selection of those references and looking up their bibliographies, and so on. References in bibliographies are like links in the chain of academic knowledge: one leads to another, which leads to another. You can citation surf on- or offline (to citation surf offline, you'll need to visit a library): online has the advantage of speed, but offline lets you access important works that are not available online.

Tip! You can use citation surfing as a search technique with both primary and secondary sources (here is a useful definition that explains [the difference between the two kinds of sources](#)). However, we will assume that you will mainly be working with secondary sources.

Citation surfing to find references is really simple, providing that: (a.) you have access to at least one relevant academic reference to use as a starting point; and (b.) that you have developed a list of search key words (see above).

Citation surfing: how to do it

Step 1. Start with a reading list, or even a single set reading, that reliably relates to the subject you are working on. You'll probably find a reading list on your subject LMS site, in your course reader, in your subject learning guide, on a handout from your tutor, or in the Handbook entry for your subject. If you have a choice of more than one good-quality reading to start with, pick the one that looks most relevant (Hint: use your list of search keywords to scan the title and, if relevant, the abstract).

Step 2. Get a copy of your chosen reading. How? Use the Library catalogue to locate books held in one of the campus library collections, or the Library's Discovery search tool to find and download journal articles and ebook chapters. Then go straight to the bibliography in your chosen reading; this might also sit under a heading like 'Works Cited' or 'References'. Use your list of search keywords (as discussed previously) to scan the list for keywords relating to your task or assignment.

Step 3. Keep going until you have put together a decent list of your own; say five to ten references as a starting point. You won't know how relevant the references you have put together are, in terms of the argument you want to make in your assignment, until you actually browse them. So it is a good idea to collect a few more than you think you might need, in case some of them turn out to be duds.

How many references is enough? That depends, and different subjects and Faculties can have different guidelines. Ask your lecturer or tutor for advice on what he or she expects in your subject. In general, longer assignments require more references, and third-year assignments usually require more references than first- or second-year ones.

Tip! Citation surfing will give you some good results, but it won't give you all the relevant results, because it limits your search to a network of authors who have previously cited one another's work. To find the best results, it's best to combine citation surfing with a more "open" search using a library database or search engine.

Tip! Be careful when using book chapters as starting points for citation surfing. Sometimes academic books use endnotes or footnotes, instead of a bibliography; and sometimes these notes—or the bibliography—are listed at the end of the book, rather than at the end of the chapter. It would be really frustrating to visit the library and photocopy a book chapter, only to discover later that your copies don't actually contain the references you need. Always make sure that you have access to the references before you log off or leave the building.

Tip! As you start to browse related publications using this method, you will find that some references and names can reappear. This recurrence can be interpreted as evidence of academic specialisation, especially where a scholar has published on a certain topic over a period of time.

The phenomenon of recurrent citation may also be a hint that publications that are cited multiple times by others may be considered more 'relevant' by the scholarly community in that discipline or field of study. These papers, or this author, may be cited multiple times by others because their impact has been controversial, or because their work has been more influential. Either way—that person's work is considered by others to matter. It is impossible to know why it is considered to matter—whether other academics have generally agreed with the arguments that have been advanced, or not—unless you actually read the publications that cite the work or the scholar in question. Don't make the mistake of thinking that just because someone's work is cited by another author, that the author (the person doing the citing) agrees with him or her.

## Search techniques in action: Citation surfing

Imagine you are writing an essay on the history of relations between Australian Aboriginal people and colonial authorities in the nineteenth century.

Using 'Discovery' to undertake a search, you identify a relevant article by Rachel Standfield: "Vacillating Manners and Sentiments of These People: Mobility, Civilisation and Dispossession in the Work of William Thomas with the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate", which was published in the journal *Law/Text/Culture* (vol. 15) in 2011 (pp. 162-184).

Let's look more closely at the Bibliography to Standfield's article, in order to locate other relevant references.

Score! In the Bibliography, you spot three references Standfield makes to different works by A. Lester (with two of these works written in collaboration):

(1) Lester, A. (2002) *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-century South Africa and Britain*. Routledge: London and New York.

- (2) Lester, A. and F. Dussart (2008). "Trajectories of protection: Protectorates of Aborigines in Early Nineteenth Century Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand." *New Zealand Geographer*. 64: 205-20.
- (3) ---. (2009). *Masculinity, Race and Family in the Colonies: Protecting Aborigines in the Nineteenth Century*". *Gender, Place and Culture*. 16/1: 63-75.

## Be A Bibliographic Detective

Bibliographies offer the careful reader much, much more than just a list of works consulted to prepare a piece of research. Some things we can learn or make a reasonable inference about, just from reading Standfield's Bibliography, include the following nuggets of information:

Observation: Lester has maintained a research interest in nineteenth century colonial history over (at least) nine years; and he / she has published a book as well as journal articles on that topic.

Inference: Lester is reasonably likely to be a reliable authority on the topic of Australian colonial history.

Observation: Standfield has cited Lester's work three times.

Inference: Standfield and Lester's research interests overlap, and she considers him/her as a relevant authority in her field of nineteenth century colonial history.

Observation: Lester has published work comparing the Australian colonial scene to other geographic locations in the same period, South Africa and New Zealand.

Inference: Lester is interested in, and has some expertise in, comparative history.

Observation: Lester has collaborated with Dussart twice, to publish two articles on colonial Protectorates of Aborigines.

Inference: F. Dussart is another author working in the field; clearly, Dussart would be another author name to search for if you wanted to locate more publications on similar topics.

Possible inference: Lester and Dussart are research collaborators, so they may be more likely to share similar views and interpretations of history. If you wanted to find a different viewpoint or interpretation of events to Lester's, Dussart may not be a good choice.

## References and Further Reading:

'Searching for Information', La Trobe University, <http://tlweb.latrobe.edu.au/ctlc/allu/skills-essentials/searching.php> [Access date: 18-04-13]

'Evaluating Websites' – online learning module from La Trobe University.

<http://latrobe.libguides.com/content.php?pid=171111&sid=1440942> [Access date: 17-04-13]

Downes, Stephen (2008). "Principles for Evaluating Websites." TAFE NSW EZine, June 30. Available online: <http://www.downes.ca/post/4> [17-04-13]