Chapter 3

Searching for Literature in Professional Journals

The processes of searching for literature and refining a topic idea are intertwined because the amount of literature found on a topic will determine whether it needs to be broadened (to find more literature) or to be narrowed (to retrieve less literature). In addition, as the literature on a topic is examined, related topics that are of even greater interest than the original topic may be identified.

The use of databases designed to assist in locating academic literature, such as professional journals, is described below.

PsycARTICLES and *PsycINFO*

Some of the examples in this chapter are from the *PsycARTICLES* database, which is published electronically by the American Psychological Association (APA). At the time of this writing, it contains more than 25,000 searchable full-text articles (i.e., the complete articles, not just summaries) from 42 journals published by APA and allied organizations. APA also publishes *PsycINFO*, which contains abstracts (i.e., summaries) of more than 1.5 million references to both APA and non-APA journal articles and books.

Access to these databases is free of charge to students through most college and university libraries.

ERIC

Some of the examples in this chapter are from the *ERIC* database, which is published electronically by the Educational Resources Information Center. At the time of this writing, it contains references to more than one million records that provide citations for journal articles, books, conference papers, and so on.

ERIC defines "education" in its broadest sense (i.e., *not* as a field devoted only to classroom and curriculum issues). For instance, a sociology student interested in reviewing literature on the homeless could do a "simple search" (with no restrictions to the search) in *ERIC*, which, at the time of this writing, retrieved references to 1,682 documents on the homeless. Restricted to only journal articles (i.e., a "restricted search," not a "simple search"), references to 736 journal articles were retrieved.[1]

Access to the *ERIC* system is free to all Internet users. Its home page can be accessed by visiting www.eric.ed.gov, where there is information about its services, history, and how to conduct effective searches for relevant literature.

Other Databases

Other major databases include *Sociological Abstracts* (formerly *SocioFile*), *Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts*, *Social Work Abstracts, Business Source Plus*, *Health Source Plus*, as well as *MEDLINE/PubMed*. Most college and university libraries maintain subscriptions to the online versions of these databases. In addition, there are highly specialized databases (not

[1] To restrict a search to only journal articles, click on "Advanced Search" on the home page. Then click on the box to the left of "Journal Articles."

listed here). These can be identified through library handouts and/or consultation with a reference librarian.

↳ Guideline 3.1
Use the database's Thesaurus to identify appropriate descriptors (search terms).

If the database has a thesaurus of keywords on which it is structured, search the thesaurus for relevant terms to use in a search. For instance, in the *ERIC* database, the Thesaurus can be accessed by clicking on the Thesaurus tab at the top of the home page.

A thesaurus can be useful in identifying search terms (known as "descriptors") that will produce the most fruitful search. For instance, entering the term "problem drinking" in the Thesaurus (and clicking through the links on the screen) results in the identification of "alcohol abuse" as the appropriate descriptor. Going back to the home page and conducting a search using "alcohol abuse" yields 4,740 references, while the less appropriate term "problem drinking" results in a less comprehensive search, yielding only 552 references.[2]

Note that the *ERIC* Thesaurus suggests related terms, broader terms, and narrower terms, which may help in pinpointing a literature search.

↳ Guideline 3.2
Use the Boolean operators NOT, AND, and OR.

By using the Boolean logical operators (NOT, AND, and OR), a reviewer can broaden or narrow a search.[3] For instance, consider the results of four searches shown in Example 3.2.1, which were conducted in the *PsycARTICLES* database. The example makes it clear that the operators NOT as well as AND *reduce* the number of references found while OR *increases* the number.

Example 3.2.1
Number of journal articles identified using NOT, AND, and OR:

Term entered in database restricted to the years 2000 to the year this was written:	Number of journal articles identified:
depression	5,977
depression NOT treatment	1,909
depression AND treatment	4,070
depression OR treatment	10,609

Boolean operators can also be used to delimit a search to selected demographics. (See Guideline 2.9 in Chapter 2.) For instance, searching only for "anxiety" in the *ERIC* database yields 7,656 references. Searching for "anxiety" AND "children" yields 1,491 references.

↳ Guideline 3.3
Consider using truncated terms.

Using truncated terms in an electronic search can increase the number of references retrieved.

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[2] Searching for "problem drinking" yields only those references in which both words appear in close proximity. In contrast, searching for the *ERIC* descriptor "alcohol abuse" locates all sources that discuss the issue, regardless of whether the descriptor is used by the authors.

[3] To access the Boolean operators in *ERIC*, first click on "Advanced Search" on the home page. In APA databases, first click on "Fielded Search."

↳ Guideline 3.7
Consider searching a citation index.

Using some of the suggestions for searching literature described above, suppose a reviewer found a pivotal journal article by Smith that was published several years ago. By using a citation index, the reviewer can identify other literature in which Smith's article has since been cited. This literature might provide alternative perspectives on Smith's article written by other writers; some might critique it, others might report successful and unsuccessful attempts to replicate Smith's research, while still others might provide evidence for and against Smith's theory, and so on. Obviously, there is great potential for obtaining valuable references by using a citation index.

Most academic libraries maintain subscriptions to major citation indices such as the *Social Science Citation Index*, the *Science Citation Index*, and the *Arts and Humanities Citation Index*. These can be searched electronically at libraries that maintain subscriptions to them.

↳ Guideline 3.8
Examine the references cited in the literature that has been located.

Research articles typically begin with literature reviews. Examine the literature citations in the articles for references that may not have been located in other ways.

↳ Guideline 3.9
Maintain a written record of how the literature search was conducted.

Suppose a reviewer reaches the conclusion that "few experimental studies have been published on the XYZ phenomenon" and includes the conclusion in a literature review. Such a statement might be challenged by a professor who is familiar with relevant experimental studies that the reviewer failed to locate. By being able to state specifically which databases were searched *and* how they were searched, the reviewer can deflect criticism that he or she had been careless in conducting the search.[6]

Exercise for Chapter 3

Directions: Answer the following questions after you search a database. Note that if you are completing this exercise at home without access to a database subscribed to by a college library, search *ERIC* (www.eric.gov), which is available free of charge to all Internet users.

1. Which database did you use for this exercise?

2. Did you consult the database's Thesaurus? If yes, was it useful? Explain. (See Guideline 3.1.)

3. Did you use Boolean operators when searching? If yes, which ones were used? Were they useful? Explain. (See Guideline 3.2.)

4. Did you search using truncated terms? If yes, were the truncated terms useful? Explain. (See Guideline 3.3.)

[6] Reviewers who prepare highly quantitative literature reviews known as "meta-analyses" are expected to describe in their reviews how they searched for relevant literature. This is discussed in the last two chapters of this book.