

Finding Journal Articles

So you just got your assignment guidelines for your first university essay ever and it looks like your prof wants you to only use peer-reviewed articles.

Where the heck are you going to find these articles?

On Google? No.

Only using Google to find journal articles is a lot like only eating the samples at Costco. Even though it's free and easy it can lack any real nourishment.

Google Scholar might be a little bit more helpful, but it might still deliver results that are irrelevant. Plus there's no way to tell which ones are peer-reviewed (if any)!

Free samples are good and all, but if you want something a little more substantial, something with a little more meat, you're going to have to go to a restaurant.

If you want good seafood you'd go to a seafood restaurant. If steak is more your style your best bet is to go to a steakhouse. Library databases are like these specific restaurants. Rather than serve every type of information, like Google, they only serve one type of information: The scholarly kind. And they serve it well.

They have much better search capabilities meaning that you'll find more relevant and scholarly results. Easy peezy!

Alright already, enough with the chit chat! Let's get to searching.

Once you've found the list of databases that are relevant for your discipline, or program, check the descriptions to see which ones will be the most helpful.

These descriptions will let you know if a database contains full-text articles, abstracts, or a mixture of both.

A full-text article is exactly what it sounds like: It's the entire article.

An abstract is a summary of an article usually provided by the author, or the database publisher.

If you're searching in a database that contains just the abstracts you might not be able to access the full article. The library only has access to certain journals and ones that it doesn't subscribe to may still show up in your search results.

Once you find a database you like click on its title.

Searcher beware: Not all databases look the same. But you're in luck, since most of them have pretty similar functions.

First, there's the keyword search.

What is a keyword? I'm glad you asked!

Keywords are the main ideas. You can generate them by breaking up your research question into smaller chunks. They can take many forms such as a theory, an event, an instance, a phrase, or a concept.

You should only ever search for 2-4 keywords though—less than 2 or more than 4 will result in far too many or not nearly enough results.

So keyword searches are the most straightforward way to search—you just pop in your keywords and hit search.

These little boxes on the side are helpful in combining keywords.

The default is usually set to AND because the database assumes you want articles that discuss all of your keywords together.

You can change it to OR which means the database will look for articles that discuss just one of your keywords.

Keyword searches are a good place to start, but sometimes they might not give you relevant results, or they might not give you enough results at all.

If you aren't getting results you can use the truncation symbol which is represented by either an asterisk or a dollar sign (depending on your database), and this is put within your keyword. This means that you'll accept articles with any variations of a certain root word. The example of Canad*, with an asterisk, or Canad\$, with a dollar sign at the end, will return anything that mentions Canada, Canada's, Canadian, or Canadians. Using the truncation symbol will broaden your search.

If you aren't getting relevant results you can try putting quotation marks around any keywords that contain multiple words. The example of "social policy" ensures that the database will search for these exact words in this exact order. Otherwise the database will search for every instance of the word social and policy- social psychology, social media, foreign policy- you'll get all sorts of irrelevant results! Using the quotation marks will narrow your search results.

If you need to refine your search even more then you can use the limiters that most databases provide. This will let you select articles from a particular time period, source, or relating to a specific subject.

Oh, and yeah, you can also limit your search to just peer-reviewed articles.

Totally awesome, right? Like I said: Easy peezy!

Remember that searching for journal articles is a process. It requires time, patience, and being methodical. Don't get discouraged if you can't find what you're looking for. Maybe all that's required is switching up your search strategy, or even the database. It might also be that there hasn't been a lot of research in your area, which is awesome; your work will be unique and important.

If you're still having trouble remember that databases will always have a help menu to provide search tips.

And of course you can always ask a member of the library staff to help you. We're always available in person and online.