



Tips for Conducting a Literature Search

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What is a Literature Search?

A literature search is a comprehensive survey of publications and information on a specific topic. The result produced at the end of a literature search is usually a list of references. (A literature search differs from a literature review, which is the written section of your research report that summarizes the literature you studied in order to develop the research study.)

Why do a Literature Search?

The process of conducting a literature search familiarizes you with the body of work related to the research topic. You may choose to use the list of references from a literature search as source material to write a literature review.

Literacy practitioners undertaking research may decide that existing academic research about their topics is not entirely relevant to their own research goals. An academic outlook can vary widely from a practitioner point of view. For a thoughtful discussion on completing a research study **without** doing a literature search, see the report, *Dancing in the Dark: How do Adults with Little Formal Education Learn? How do Practitioners do Collaborative Research?* By Marina Niks Darcy Allen, Paula Davies, Dee McRae, Kate Nonesuch, 2003.

The authors discuss differences in attitude between literacy practitioners and academics when it comes to studying literature as part of the research process. <http://www.nald.ca/PROVINCE/ALT/RiPAL/Resources/dark/dark.pdf>

Getting Started

A literature search is most successful if you follow a systematic plan. Here are some important first steps to help you get started.

Choose your search words and their synonyms

You may want to leap in and start searching, but it is worthwhile to choose good search words first. Write a paragraph which outlines your research interest. Note words or phrases which define your topic. Often a topic will have several key concepts. Generate a list of synonyms and other words that might be used in discussion of each concept. Be creative! When you start searching, you can use the synonyms in keyword searching.

E.g. **Topic:** What effect does health have on literacy learners' success?

Concept 1	Concept 2
Learner success	Health
Learning outcome	Wellbeing
Learner progress	Illness
Goal achievement	Sickness
Learner assessment	Disease
	Medical condition

Tip: An excellent source for choosing synonyms and search terms is the Canadian Literacy Thesaurus, available online or in print. (<http://thesaurusalpha.org/thesaurus/index.htm>) It is a list of the standard terms used by cataloguers and indexers to describe literacy resources in Canada.

Choose the right place to search

After reading this guide, you'll have a better idea where you're likely to find information on your topic. You can search in subject specific databases, on the Internet, or in library catalogues. Web search engines such as Google or AllTheWeb.com, are usually most useful to find general information of public interest. Using databases devoted to adult literacy such as NALD or the Ontario Database of Adult Literacy Research is the best way to find in-depth research done by professionals in the literacy field. Spend a moment thinking where you are most likely to find the information you want.

Tip: Consult **Where to Look for Adult Literacy Resources** on page eight of this guide for recommended resources on adult literacy.

Effective Search Skills

When you search for information using a computer, you'll get the best results if you use the appropriate search strategy. Search strategy skills will help when you search databases, library catalogues or the Internet. The following link leads to a thirteen page online tutorial which:

- defines and explains keyword searching, subject searching, natural language searching
- suggests methods for refining your search strategy if you are not getting useful results

The tutorial was prepared by a consortium of five Ohio college libraries, so some of its information is specific to those libraries and to college assignments. Most of the information is of a general nature, though, and useful to all researchers.

Tip: Check the Definitions link in the top right of the tutorial pages if you come across a word you're unfamiliar with.

Search Techniques - Five Colleges of Ohio Research Tutorial (13 pages)

<http://www.denison.edu/collaborations/ohio5/infolit/b4techniques/>

Tips for Doing Research on the Internet

The following link leads to an eight page online tutorial which:

- explains when it's appropriate to search for information on the Internet
- defines Internet directories, search engines, and meta-search engines
- explains how to evaluate information on the Internet

Tip: Check the Definitions link in the top right of the tutorial pages if you come across a word you're unfamiliar with.

Using the Web for Research - Five Colleges of Ohio Research Tutorial (8 pages)

<http://www.denison.edu/collaborations/ohio5/infolit/b5webresearch/>

What is a Database? How do Databases Work?

If you are intimidated by the word database, here are the answers to set you at ease. The following link leads to a five page online tutorial which defines and explains different types of databases.

Tip: Check the Definitions link in the top right of the tutorial pages if you come across a word you're unfamiliar with.

Research Databases - Five Colleges of Ohio Research Tutorial (5 pages)

<http://www.denison.edu/collaborations/ohio5/infolit/b2databases/>

Tip: It's important to remember that databases often contain only title, author, and publisher information about a resource (also known as bibliographic information) and **not the full-text** of the resource itself. Often, after completing a database search, the researcher must then find out where a resource is located (in a library, at a store, at a publisher) in order to read it.

Tip: The databases of Canadian Adult Literacy resources listed on page six of this guide are available online at **no charge**. Be aware, though, that many databases are commercial products that require users to **pay** for a license or

subscription in order to search. At your local public or academic libraries, ask which databases they offer that cover the social sciences and adult education.

Evaluate What You Find

An important step in the search process is to evaluate the information you find. The following link leads to a two page tutorial which lists different questions to ask when evaluating resources.

Evaluating Information - Five Colleges of Ohio Research Tutorial (2 pages)
<http://www.denison.edu/collaborations/ohio5/infolit/c3evaluate/>

Keep Track of What You Find

When you start finding useful resources, you'll want to keep a record of them. Be sure to record full bibliographic information: title, author, year of publication, journal title and volume number (if applicable). This is called a citation or reference. Keeping good records helps you to locate your resources at a later date.

Tip: See **Bibliographic Management Software** near the end of this guide for information on using software to organize your citations.

You may also wish to keep notes about the content and relevance of each resource. On the next page, there is a template of a chart you can use to organize your research notes.

Title and Year	Author(s)	Topic	Key Points	Page References	Relation to Your Topic
Moving right along: a report on learner referral and transition (2001)	Marianne Paul.	Study of adult students making transitions from LBS agencies to other settings where they would continue the journey towards their goals	Importance of self-management and self direction skills in the success of the student making the transition to a literacy agency or other educational setting.	12, 15, 18	Discusses learner referrals

You've Found a Great Citation! What Does it Mean?

Often, you'll find a citation (also known as a reference or bibliographic information) to a resource that sounds useful. The citation might look like this:

Frontier College. *The Literacy and Health Project: Making the World Healthier and Safer for People Who Can't Read*. Toronto, 1989.

It can be difficult to decipher citations and determine if a resource is a book, a journal article, or a chapter in a book. The following link leads to a three page tutorial which dissects citations and identifies their different elements.

Understanding Citations - Five Colleges of Ohio Research Tutorial (3 pages)
<http://www.denison.edu/collaborations/ohio5/infolit/c1citations/>

Bibliographic Management Software

Having a complete, correct record of citations saves time and avoids frustration if you want to locate resources at a later date. You might be interested in using computer software—called bibliographic management software—that is designed to record and organize your citations.

Bibliographic management software allows you to keep track of citations by creating a personal database of references. Records can be created for books, journal articles, book chapters, dissertations, art work, recordings, Web pages, letters, manuscripts, etc. These records can be entered manually or imported directly from many library catalogs and commercial databases.

Once a record is in the database, you can search for all records on a specific subject or by a certain author, create bibliographies of all or selected records, and format references in a specific bibliographic style while using word processing software.

Although there are many different bibliographic management software products, Thomson ISI ResearchSoft produces the three that are most popular amongst academic researchers: EndNote, ProCite and Reference Manager. To find out more about them, you can visit:

<http://www.endnote.com/>

<http://www.procite.com/>

<http://www.refman.com/>

Where to Look for Adult Literacy Resources

Canadian Adult Literacy Databases

Directory of Canadian Adult Literacy Research in English

<http://www.nald.ca/crd/start.htm>

NALD - National Adult Literacy Database

<http://www.nald.ca>

Ontario Adult Literacy Research Database

<http://research.alphaplus.ca/basic.html>

RECRAF - Le répertoire canadien de la recherche sur l'alphabétisation des adultes en français

<http://www.alpha.cdeacf.ca/recraf>

Selected Adult Literacy Research Resources on the Internet

AlphaPlus Index to Web Resources

<http://alphaplus.ca/opnhs/english/subjAuth.asp>

Look under the subject heading "Research" to see a variety of sites and reports related to adult literacy research.

International Adult Literacy Survey Database

<http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/89-588-XIE/ials-eiaa.htm>

A source of adult literacy statistics created jointly by Statistics Canada and the National Center for Education Statistics, an agency of the Institute of Educational Sciences, United States Department of Education.

National Literacy Secretariat – Publications

On this page, look at section D – "International Adult Literacy Survey Series – Research Papers." These full-text documents were developed by the National Literacy Secretariat, HRDC and Statistics Canada as a result of the data and information found in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS).

<http://www.nald.ca/nls/inpub/nlspub0.htm#4>

ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation - Research

<http://www.abc-canada.org/research/>

ABC CANADA engages in research that supports and strengthens the literacy field and that promotes public awareness of literacy. Check this page for titles and summaries of recent research projects.

Internet Public Library Adult Education Page

<http://www.ipl.org/div/subject/browse/edu55.00.00/>

A list of primarily U.S. sites relating to adult education and literacy.

Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education (ACVE) Archive

Maintained by the California Adult Literacy Professional Development Centre

<http://www.calpro-online.org/ERIC/index.asp>

Explore the listings under "Links to Offsite Full Text Resources" to find many full text adult literacy articles and reports. Check "Journals on the Web" for access to full text articles (some free, some fee-based) on adult education and literacy.

Exploring Adult Literacy

<http://literacy.kent.edu/cra/>

Peer reviewed electronic journal for "adult literacy practitioners in adult basic education, family literacy and workplace literacy."

Library Catalogues

AlphaPlus Library catalogue, AlphaCat

<http://alphacat.alphaplus.ca/ipac-cgi/ipac.exe>

Ontario's largest collection of adult literacy resources to support practitioners, learners and researchers in the Deaf, Native, Francophone and Anglophone literacy streams.

National Literacy Secretariat - Online Catalogues of Literacy Collections

This page has links to Canadian online catalogues of literacy collections.

<http://www.nald.ca/nls/inpub/OCLC.htm>

Consult your public library or a nearby college or university library. Inquire about the possibility of borrowing items from libraries in different cities using Inter-Library Loan.