Literature Search Strategies

Here are 16 strategies for finding scholarly literature relevant to your research topic. Melissa Cardenas-Dow, Les Canterbury, Jim Spickard, and Jim’s students developed them for a University of Redlands library assignment.

General Strategies

1. Search a database of scholarly journal articles, such as ProQuest, GreenFile, etc. *(There are many databases, but searching them is just one strategy.)*
2. Look up articles in paper copies of journals. *(This alerts you to other articles in those journals, including multi-article symposia, which do not show up in database searches.)*
3. For books: search the library catalog. Search WorldCat or other combined catalogs.
4. Search Google Scholar *(http://scholar.google.com)* *(including references)*
5. Search Google Books *(http://books.google.com).*
6. Search Google *(wisely; there’s a lot of junk out there).* *(You can search for topics, but you can also search for the authors of things you have found useful. See what else they wrote.)*
7. Search Amazon *(also wisely).* *(Use the “Look inside” feature and check out a book’s reference list.)*
8. Check out the footnotes and references on Wikipedia articles. *(Wikipedia is a place to start, not a place to end.)*
9. Search for your favorite authors’ Curriculum Vitae, to see what else they wrote.
10. Search one of the Dissertation Abstracts databases. *(There are several. Google “dissertation abstracts” to find them.)*

Backward-search Strategies *(search for prior references)*

11. Check out the reference list at the end of a good, relevant article on your topic.
12. Check out the reference list at the end of a good, relevant book on your topic. *(If the book lacks a reference list, you may have to look up your topic in the index, then check the footnotes on the relevant pages.)*
13. Locate published literature reviews on your topic. *(Check out journals like Annual Review of Sociology, etc.)*

Forward-search Strategies *(search for subsequent references)*

14. Use Citation Index to locate later articles that cite an article that you find useful.
15. Click the “Cited by” (or similar) link in the journal database you are using. *(This locates articles that cite the one you are viewing.)*

Sideways-search Strategies *(search for contemporaneous references)*

16. Click the “find other articles like this”, either on Google or in those databases that offer this service.