

ACQUIRING THE BASICS OF A GOOD RESEARCH METHODOLOGY SUMMARY

1 - Documentary research methodology: introduction

- Definition:

Literature search methodology gives you a step by step path to search, identify and find documents related to a subject by developing a search strategy.

- Why is it important to develop a search strategy?

In a context of information overload (infobesity) and diversity of media, the processes of documentary research and information validation require the application of an effective methodology.

- One or more methods for documentary research?

There are different methods for defining a good documentary research strategy. However, they are always based on a few key principles, which we will discuss in turn.

- Objectives of the methodology:

The aim of a good research methodology is to facilitate the production of academic work that combines documentary richness and scientific rigour.

- The preliminary questions to ask oneself:

1. What is the nature of the work to be produced?

presentation, dissertation, article, study report, etc.

2. What is the expected level of information?

basic information: one or two books and an encyclopaedia will suffice

more specialized or more developed information: go to articles in periodicals, conferences, reports, theses, standards...

3. What is the nature of the information sought?

Developments on a subject, statistical data, press review, etc.

4. How up-to-date is the information sought?

from archival documents to the latest known results of the research?

2- Preparing your research

Principle: Going from the general to the particular

It is a matter of questioning the subject in all its dimensions, formulating it in a **short sentence**, selecting **important concepts** and looking for **synonyms**.

This step allows you to set the issue, identify documentary needs and select the key concepts/words in order to question your sources.

1 - Define the topic

Choose the topic

Your **prior knowledge** and **personal interests** in the subject and its relevance to the teaching to which it relates are fundamental elements that should guide your choice.

First documentary approach

To clarify the subject and to understand it in a comprehensive way, there are several materials that give you an overview of the issue.

What types of items?

At this stage, your sources will mainly include **dictionaries and encyclopedias** (paper or online), manuals or review articles.

Recommendations

It may be useful to make a list of the different aspects of the issue that emerge in the course of this initial research, as well as a list of points on which you already have ideas.

2 - Identifying the subject

Use the QQQOCP (3QOCP) method:

This is a mnemonic for retaining a set of simple questions that will be used to identify, clarify and expand on a topic:

Who? = Who are the actors, the people involved?

What? = What aspects are of interest for my work?

When? = What is the period in question?

Where? = Is the subject limited to a specific geographical area?

How? = What approaches or points of view should be considered? (historical, sociological, economic, political, etc.).

Why? = What is the importance of the subject in the current context?

3 - Formulating the topic

A short sentence

The topic should be expressed in a short sentence, if possible in the form of a question and using meaningful terms. The search statement should be as specific as possible.

Key Concepts

Each term in the statement is important and will correspond to key concepts/words that are used to develop the research equations.

A selection of terms

It is advisable for each concept to search for one or more synonyms or associated terms and their translation into English (or other languages depending on your subject).

4 - Narrow or broaden the subject

At the end of this stage, two types of difficulties may arise:

- **Difficulty n° 1:** the subject is too general, too vast.

Major risks :

- Overabundance of documentation
- Treat the subject in a superficial way, wanting to be exhaustive.

What to do?

Restrict the subject by focusing on one aspect of the issue, by delimiting a geographical area or a given period of time. This choice will not be sanctioned if it is argued.

- **Difficulty n° 2:** the subject is too precise, too sharp.

Major risks :

- Very difficult to deal with
- Difficulty locating resources
- Need to interview many sources

What to do?

Put the subject in perspective. Putting the topic in a broader context should allow you to address aspects of the issue that you might not have thought of at first and thus broaden its scope.

3- Selecting sources of information

(to be completed with the document "Identify the different types of documents - Summary")

1 - Choice of information sources

After analyzing and delineating the topic, the best sources of information to conduct the literature search should be selected.

There are two dimensions to this process:

- the **type of material** you are looking for: monographs, journal articles, theses, etc.
- the **type of resources** to be queried, which will depend on the nature of the subject and the type of document sought: library catalogues, databases, Web search engines, specialized portals, etc.

2 - Type of material

It depends on the level and nature of the information sought:

Dictionaries and encyclopedias, useful for understanding the subject and clarifying it, especially when dealing with new concepts.

Books or monographs, useful for further research.

Included in this category are

- **manuals and memos**, which take stock of an issue and give a quick idea of a subject.
- the **proceedings of symposia**, which are the minutes of a congress

General or specialised periodicals (journals): they provide information on the latest research results or on current social issues.

Thesis, dissertations, research reports (grey literature): of a high scientific level, they are appropriate for dealing with a specialized subject.

Specific material (maps, patents, images, statistical data, etc.): their use will depend on the disciplinary field or the approach chosen to deal with a subject.

Official documentation: this is all the official documents issued by the State (laws, decrees, regulations, public contracts, associations, etc.).

3 - Terminology

A distinction must be made between the "primary source" and the "secondary source".

Primary source

Materials presenting information of an original nature, i.e. in the state in which it was written or conceived by the author. It is the source itself.

Secondary source

Material containing information of a descriptive or analytical nature on primary sources. E.g.: bibliography, catalogue, index...Bibliographic records describing a book are therefore a secondary material.

4 - Notions of noise and silence

In literature research, two important concepts should be kept in mind. They reflect the failure of a query, which must then be reformulated or refined. (cf. search operators)

Noise

It is the set of irrelevant material found in response to a question, when searching for information. The relevant information is drowned in the mass.

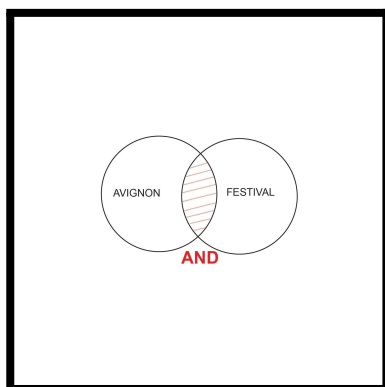
Silence

This is the set of relevant material not posted during a literature search, where relevant information is not found and the searcher might think there is none.

4 - Search techniques

1 - Boolean operators : AND, OR, NOT

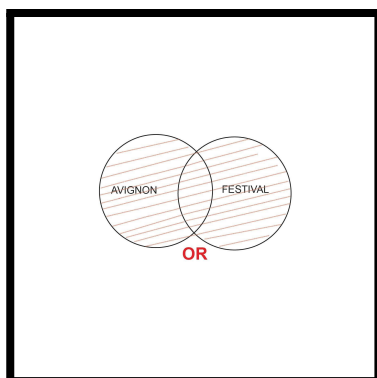
By establishing a logical connection between search terms or keywords, they make it possible to find information or material.



Very precise search:

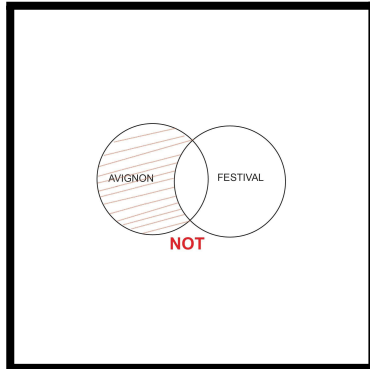
only on the Avignon Festival,

not on the city of Avignon or on other festivals.



Very broad search:

- on Avignon
- on festivals
- on the Avignon Festival



Targeted search:

everything about the city of Avignon
except what concerns its Festival

2 - The truncation

* allows you to find the different endings of a search term

Ex: econom*

Do not use on words that are too short.

3 - Search by expression

The use of quotation marks « » or “ ” allows you to search on a “string of characters” (same words in the same order).

It is particularly useful when a search results in too many results or to search for a specific expression

E.g. «European Commission» will search for references containing this term in the order in which the terms are entered.

4 - Case (upper case, empty words)

It is recommended that when searching a database or library catalogue, use only lower case, non-accented letters. Empty words are non-significant words such as articles, prepositions, pronouns, etc. With the exception of a phrase search, they are completely useless.

Warning: each database may have its own search tips. Remember to consult the online help or the tutorials offered to learn more.

Source:

Archambault, Caroline. *Guides: Préparer sa recherche documentaire: Opérateurs booléens*.

Disponible sur : <https://libguides.hec.ca/preparer-recherche-documentaire/operateurs> (Consulté le : 5 septembre 2022).

Université d'Avignon et des Pays de Vaucluse, Service Formation des Publics.

Méthodologie de la recherche documentaire : principes clés. 2013. Disponible sur :

https://bu.univ-avignon.fr/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Methodo_documentaire.pdf (Consulté le : 15 juin 2020).