



Conducting a Search for Research Literature: guidelines from research in practice

Planning your Search

- Be clear about the question you want answered. Are you looking for background contextual information? Are you looking for evaluation studies that can demonstrate the likely outcomes of a particular service or intervention? Are you looking for statistical information? Most important of all are you sure that it is a question that is likely to be answered by a search of research literature?
- Think about the limits of your search. Do you need to move beyond the **research in practice** website? Which publication years are to be covered? Will it only be UK-based research?
- Decide how you will conduct your search. This is a decision based upon the time and the resources you have available. Your search may involve using a local library, a University library, resources held in your own agency, the Internet or subscription-based databases to which your agency has access. You could also contact specialist libraries, such as the [NCB Inform](#) and [NSPCC Inform](#).
- Decide if you need specialist help to conduct a search and see if there is a friendly librarian or research officer that can help you. Do note that a comprehensive search can be both time-consuming and require the specific skills of a librarian or someone trained in information retrieval. Be realistic about the scope of the search you want to conduct (you may decide, for example, to focus solely on databases that have a specialist focus on social care research, such as [Care Data](#) and [Child Data](#)).

Conducting the Search

- Be transparent about how the search has been conducted in any subsequent documentation and record what sources you have used and the order in which you have searched them.
- Do note that, broadly speaking, there are two means of searching bibliographical databases - 'free-text' searching when you decide on the likely terms/phrases you will use in conducting your search and key word searching (the 'thesaurus' approach) that enables you to search a database using words that have been identified by the cataloguer, eg CareData. Some databases allow you to do both.
- Differences in terms, phrases and variations in spelling can often mean that documents will be missed, hence the specialist nature of a systematic search.

Electronic Resources

The following electronic databases and gateways may be useful to search – but note that the extent of the search will be dictated by its purpose and the time and resources you have available.

Free Bibliographic Databases:

- CareData (social care) <http://www.elsc.org.uk/caredata/caredata.htm>
- ERIC (education) <http://www.eric.ed.gov/searchdb/index.html>
- MEDLINE/PubMed (health) <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi>
- NCJRS (criminal justice) <http://www.ncjrs.org/>

Commercial Bibliographic Databases (i.e. subscription based):

General databases:

- Inside (British Library)
- Sigle (British Library: grey literature)

Age-related (social care) databases:

- ChildData (from 1 April 2004 this is available free to local authorities)
- Ageinfo (SCIE aims to provide free access)

Social Sciences databases:

- ASSIA (Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts)
- SocialSciSearch
- Sociofile
- Acompline (urban and social policy)
- PsychLit
- PsycInfo
- Econlit
- Criminal Justice Abstracts

Health databases:

- DH-Data
- EMBASE

Education databases:

- CERUK (Current Educational Research in the UK)

This list of commercial databases is by no means exhaustive. Free access to many of them is usually possible if you are a member of a university library.

Free Directories/Gateways:

- eLSC (electronic library of social care) - provides access to CareData database (amongst other things) <http://www.elsc.org.uk/>
- **research in practice** – provides access to a database of researchers (register of researchers), a database of research reviews (evidencebank). It also provides online links to a wide range of bibliographic databases. <http://www.rip.org.uk/>
- National Statistics Online <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/>

- NeLH (National Electronic Library of Health) - provides access to MEDLINE/PubMed and other medical/clinical databases <http://www.nelh.nhs.uk/>
- SOSIG (social science information gateway) – provides access to on-line social science information <http://www.sosig.ac.uk/>

Details of other potentially useful sources of research material are available on the Evidence Network website: <http://www.evidencenetwork.org/resources.asp>

Online Journal Information:

Relatively few online journals are available without a subscription. A number of journals do, however, provide a search facility for articles, index of contents and, occasionally, abstracts. You can refer to the **research in practice** recommended journals list.

Help with Searching

Databases have guidance on making effective use of their search facilities and online journal information will sometimes provide a search facility plus information about contents and abstracts of articles

However the indexing and abstracting standards of the electronic databases listed above are variable, and so are the tools used to extract information from them. This makes it difficult to search in a systematic way. There are moves underway to bring some of the smaller, specialised UK social and public policy databases together so that they can be searched simultaneously but, at present, the only practical course is to search each in turn.

These difficulties are discussed in more detail on the Evidence Network website at: <http://www.evidencenetwork.org/searching.asp>. This web page also includes helpful guidance on how to search electronic databases in the social sciences (e.g. guidance on choosing search terms).

Further guidelines to using databases and gateways can be found in the recent publication by the Centre for Evidence Based Social Services, 'Accessing social care research: An introductory guide' by Stuart MacWilliam, Peter Maggs, Alice Caldwell and Stephanie Tierney (2003). For a summary, go to: http://www.ex.ac.uk/cebss/accessing_research.html

Most of the databases listed above are only available on subscription. Given the logistical problems of accessing these resources and searching them in an effective and systematic way, it may be worth employing an experienced intermediary to carry out your initial search, e.g. information retrieval staff at:

- the ESRC UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice <http://www.evidencenetwork.org/home.asp>
- the National Children's Bureau <http://www.ncb.org.uk/>

Access to the above is dependent on membership. However:

- the NSPCC will do free online searches of its own library: <http://www.nspcc.org.uk/html/Home/Informationresources/informationresources.htm>.

A cautionary note ...

The literature yield from searching is likely to be of variable relevance and quality. There are useful frameworks available to critically evaluate the research articles you have found on (<http://www.rip.org.uk/>)