RESEARCHING YOUR ASSIGNMENT

Guide 3
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Analysing an Assignment & Identifying your Information Needs

Analyse the assignment

What do I already know about the topic?

Write down what you already know, as well as any questions, thoughts and ideas you may have.

Consider the following example:

Discuss factors that influence the relationship between food intake and children’s behaviour.

Notes might include:

- Is behaviour affected by the type of food children eat?
- Do hormonal changes in children affect eating patterns?
- Are the factors psychological or physiological? Or both?

This process of brainstorming helps to focus and understand a topic.

What type of information is needed?

For a brief assignment much of the information needed may be obtained from encyclopaedias, a few books, and perhaps a few key journal articles. More involved projects may require extensive searches and awareness of the pertinent literature on the topic.

The following questions should also be considered:

- How current should the information be?
- What types of publications are most appropriate for your assignment? In the example above, an article from the Journal of Nutrition would be an appropriate source, while an article from Women’s Weekly would not.
Find and Read Background Materials

Background reading helps you to become more familiar with a topic. Make notes on important keywords and questions to pursue.

a) Refer to Study Guides and Reading Lists

These handouts, provided by your lecturer, contain lists of books and other references that are recommended starting points for your assignment.

b) Research Guides in print and on the Web

Librarians have created Research Guides for most of the disciplines taught at Macquarie University.

- The print guides “Getting started on your assignment” are located on Level 2 in the Self Service Area, arranged by subject.
- Web-based e-guides provide links to websites, databases and e-books relevant to your subject area: [http://www.library.mq.edu.au/eguides/](http://www.library.mq.edu.au/eguides/)

c) Investigate Reference Sources

Reference sources can provide a succinct overview of your topic. In many cases, the same breadth of knowledge outlined in one encyclopaedia article could only be obtained by reading several books and journal articles.

Almost all the printed Reference material held by the Library is in the Reference Collection on Level 2. Reference e-books are also available. Search for these via the Catalogue, selecting Electronic books from the Quick Limit. This collection includes:

- **Specialised dictionaries**
  These define subject terminology and provide keywords to use in searches.

- **Specialised handbooks and encyclopaedias**
  These provide a subject overview of your topic.

Do not underestimate the value of reference sources at this stage of the research process. For example, consider this question:

*Discuss factors that influence the relationship between food intake and children’s behaviour.*

The *Encyclopedia of Human Nutrition* contains an article called “Dietary effects on mood and behaviour” which offers an overview of issues relevant to this question. This article lists a number of foods that effect behaviour, including mental performance. It refers to other articles in this encyclopedia that discuss nutritional problems in adolescents and preschoolers. The article ends with a list of references for further reading.
# Overview of Information Resources

Different types of information resources are available in the Library. The chart below lists the most common types of resources, when to use them and some tips for locating them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Use for</th>
<th>How to find</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reference materials:</td>
<td>A general introduction to a topic.</td>
<td>Search the Catalogue using keywords for your broad topic and the words encyclopaedias, dictionaries or handbooks.</td>
<td>Encyclopedia of Human Nutrition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encyclopedia of Humann Nutrition</td>
<td>References to further reading.</td>
<td>Limit the search to Electronic Books and use keywords for ebooks.</td>
<td>Macmillan Dictionary of Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dictionaries, etc.</td>
<td>Terminology.</td>
<td>Browse in your subject area in the Reference Collection on Level 2 of the Library.</td>
<td>Penguin Dictionary of Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>choose your subject and select Dictionaries, encyclopedias and handbooks.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>Comprehensive, well-organised coverage of a topic.</td>
<td>Search the Catalogue.</td>
<td>Christensen, Larry B.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Limit the search to Electronic books in the catalogue for e-books.</td>
<td>Diet-behavior relationships: focus on depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Use references in encyclopaedia articles and other overviews.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal Articles</td>
<td>Current research on your topic.</td>
<td>Search a citation database for references to articles.</td>
<td>Young, B. et al. (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scholarly information.</td>
<td>Search or browse a full text database for complete articles.</td>
<td>“Eating behaviour and its variability in 1 year old children.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Search or browse a print index for references to articles.</td>
<td>Appetite 35(2), 171-177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines and Newspapers</td>
<td>General coverage.</td>
<td>Search a newspaper index.</td>
<td>Sydney Morning Herald</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recent information and opinion.</td>
<td>You may find some articles in electronic databases.</td>
<td>The Economist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Browse the current serials display on Level 2 for current magazines and newspapers.</td>
<td>Factiva or Proquest ANZ newsstand – databases which include the full-text of major newspapers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Serials

Serials include publications such as newspapers, magazines and journals that are issued regularly e.g. every month. They are an important source of current information. This type of publication ranges from scholarly to general interest to sensational. The challenge is to choose those periodicals that are appropriate for the type of research you are performing.

In the academic world, scholarly journals are preferable to popular magazines for finding information. They provide more in-depth coverage than books and may offer the latest published research in a particular field. Articles in scholarly journals are usually peer-reviewed, which means that other academics have read the article to guarantee that it is significant and based on solid research.

The range of periodical publications include:

**Scholarly**
These journals often contain peer-reviewed articles and are always appropriate sources for academic assignments. Examples include the *Journal of Nutrition*, *Cambridge Journal of Economics* and *Australian Journal of Politics and History*.

**Trade**
Trade publications are usually related to a profession and are often published by a professional organisation; for example, the Law Council of Australia publishes *Australian Lawyer*. Trade publications provide a way for practising professionals to keep up-to-date in their fields. These can be good sources of information on the real-world aspects of the discipline you are studying.

**General Interest**
These publications are produced for the general public and include magazines such as the *Bulletin* and newspapers. Some general interest publications can be useful for very current information such as share prices or commentary on current issues. Evaluate the reliability or political bias of these publications before using them.

**Entertainment/Sensationalistic**
These types of publications offer entertainment and gossip. In most cases, these publications should not be used in academic research. An exception is in cultural studies, where these publications are used as raw data to glean information about cultural and social attitudes. For example, a researcher investigating the role of celebrities in contemporary culture would use *Who* magazine as source of data.

The Library holds journals in print or online and sometimes both.
Finding Research Literature in the Library

The Library homepage www.library.mq.edu.au is the best place to begin a search for information resources.

Find books/e-books/videos/journals using the Catalogue
Follow the Catalogue link to search for books and other resources.

Use e-Reserve to find course readings online
Select e-Reserve to link to a selection of course reading materials available online.

Use Research Databases to search for journal articles
A database is an electronic collection of records including references to journal articles, reports, books chapters or conference papers etc...
Databases are searchable by keyword, subject, article title, author, date or journal title. Macquarie University Library subscribes to a wide range of databases. Some will have the full text of an article whilst others will give a citation and/or abstract.

Use Journal Finder to search for journal titles
Select Journal Finder to search for journal titles in both print and electronic formats.

Also useful – Find Information on my Subject
Go to http://www.library.mq.edu.au/eguides/ to view a list of e-guides for particular disciplines. These guides link to encyclopaedias, dictionaries, electronic databases, journals and scholarly web sites.
Developing a Search Strategy

Databases and catalogues may be searched by keywords or subject headings. To develop a search strategy, identify the key concepts or ideas contained in your topic.

Example question: Discuss factors that influence the relationship between food intake and children’s behaviour.

Three main concepts are contained in this question:

- **Concept 1: Food**
- **Concept 2: Children**
- **Concept 3: Behaviour**

Refer to recommended readings, dictionaries, encyclopedias or textbooks to obtain a better understanding of these concepts.

List alternative keywords for each concept. These additional terms could be more specific or more general alternatives. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept 1 FOOD</th>
<th>Concept 2 CHILDREN</th>
<th>Concept 3 BEHAVIOUR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hunger</td>
<td>infants</td>
<td>behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diet</td>
<td>girls/boys</td>
<td>hyperactivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sugar</td>
<td>adolescents</td>
<td>anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chocolate</td>
<td></td>
<td>depression</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some people find it easier to use Concept (Mind) maps

- sugar, soft drink, red cordial
- caffeine, stimulants, chocolate
- lethargy, anxiety, depression, hyperactivity
- diet, nutrition, food, eating, hunger
- food, behaviour, children
- infants, girls/boys, adolescents
Combining Terms - Boolean Searching

In order to find books, journal articles etc. construct a search query or statement that contains these concepts (i.e. food/children/behaviour).

Use the Boolean term **AND** to combine search terms. The Boolean term **AND** requires that all keywords must be present in the search result.

Use **AND** to narrow a search and make it more specific.

For example,
- Food and Children
- Food and Behaviour
- Food and Children and Behaviour

In the diagram below, the circles represent the information retrieved from a keyword search.

Records with the keyword **Food**

Records with the keyword **Children**

Records with both terms **Food and Children**
How to broaden or narrow a search

Repeat your search if too many or too few records are found.

If too many results are found:

- choose a more specific or precise keyword
e.g. hyperactivity instead of behaviour
- add another concept to your search, using the Boolean AND
e.g. food and children and behaviour

If only a few results are found:

- try searching with alternative keywords
- choose a broader, less specific term
e.g. food instead of sugar
- select another information source, book, database, index or encyclopaedia

Truncation and Wild Card symbols

Another way of broadening a search is to use truncation or wild card symbols.

Truncation

Truncation symbols are used to search for all variations in word endings.

$ child$ retrieves child, children, childhood

Wildcards

Wild card symbols are used to substitute for variations of spelling within a word. This symbol is useful when retrieving documents with British and American spelling variations.

? behavio?r retrieves behavior, behaviour

Different databases use a variety of truncation and wildcard symbols. You will need to refer to the database’s Help screen to locate the appropriate truncation symbol.
Evaluating Resources

Once relevant resources have been located they will need to be evaluated. This evaluation allows you to determine the best material available for a topic from the resources you have located. Evaluating your resources has two aspects.

1. How valid is the material?
2. How relevant is the material to your information needs?

Checklist for evaluating validity

Authority    Check the authority of the material. Who is the author and who is the publisher? Are the author’s qualifications for writing the article or book identified. Is the author credible? Check if the journal is peer reviewed. A peer reviewed or refereed journal will have more academic credibility than a general publication.

Accuracy    Check that the material is accurate. Are the sources for any factual information clearly listed so they can be verified? Do charts and/or graphs containing statistical data, have clear labels and up to date information? Are statements or arguments made are supported by facts?

Objectivity    Check that the material is written objectively. Is the information provided as a public service? Does it come from an academic institution? Do the author or the publisher have a vested interest in the material? For example, Greenpeace would publish material with a different bias than a company that mined uranium.

Currency    Check that the material is current. When was it written? Is there a newer edition, has the material been revised? Is it the most up to date material on the topic?

Coverage    Check what the material covers. Are all of the arguments on the topic or is only one perspective presented? Are all areas of the topic relevant to your needs presented?

Important Reminder
Always remember to get all the information needed to correctly cite the material you are using. This will save time and anxiety when creating your bibliography.

Checklist for evaluating relevance

1. Is the material at an appropriate level for the topic? (Not too technical/technical, not too vague). Does it help to answer the question or clarify the topic?
2. Do you understand what the material is saying? What is the article or book or website assuming and arguing?
3. Does it support or refute the argument you want to take when dealing with the topic?
4. What time frame is available for the research?
5. How much material do you need? A PhD student will need a much wider range of research resources than a first year undergraduate doing an assignment.
Appendix 1 - ETHICAL & LEGAL ISSUES

Copyright and Students
All students should be aware of their ethical and legal responsibilities when using materials created by others. Below is an extract from Macquarie University’s Copyright Unit on copyright for students. Further details about copyright can be found at: http://www.copyright.mq.edu.au/students.html

"Under an agreement with the centralised copyright body CAL, students can be provided with a vast amount of copyright material in the course of their research and study.

There are limitations, however, so please observe the copyright notices on various devices around campus, such as photocopiers, printers, computers with removable storage media (such as floppy disks or CDs).

Students are responsible for observing the limitations, such as the limitation on generally copying one book chapter from a particular book, or one journal article from a journal. Copyright breaches by students can be pursued at a personal level by the copyright owner or their agent, independent of the University”.

Plagiarism
Below is an extract from Macquarie University’s Policy on Plagiarism. Further details can be found at: http://www.copyright.mq.edu.au/plag.html

“Definition: Plagiarism involves using the work of another person and presenting it as one’s own. Any of the following acts constitutes plagiarism unless the source of each quotation or piece of borrowed material is clearly acknowledged.

- copying out part(s) of any document or audio-visual material (including computer based material);
- using or extracting another person’s concepts, experimental results, or conclusions;
- summarising another person’s work;
- in an assignment where there was collaborative preparatory work, submitting substantially the same final version of any material as another student.

Encouraging or assisting another person to commit plagiarism is a form of improper collusion and may attract the same penalties which apply to plagiarism.