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Research Tips and Tricks for Students of English

UB | Für alle offen

1. The Basics

Where to start?

!!!
If you haven't done so already, go and install the **VPN Client**. (Seriously, do it, you won't get very far otherwise!) You can get it from the University of Basel's IT-services website here.
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Also, make sure you **know how to log in to your library account** to borrow books, place reservations, choose your pickup locations (where applicable), place interlibrary loans, manually extend your loan periods, save searches etc.
If you have any questions regarding your account, follow this link for help, FAQs, and contact information:
https://ub.unibas.ch/de/auskunft-beratung/
!!!

Your first stop should always be the **website of the University Library** (UB) as well as the respective **subject pages** (Fachseiten):

- https://ub.unibas.ch/de/home/ → The UB's Homepage from where you can access everything else.
- https://ub.unibas.ch/de/fachgebiete/englisch/ → The subject page for Anglophone Linguistics & Literary Studies where you'll find links to subject-specific databases and other e-resources.[1]

There you will find general information on all things UB/literature/research-related: a lot of resources, links to various e-media, as well as the contact details of the people who can help you with your questions. It's definitely worthwhile familiarising yourself with these websites.

A bit of useful library vocabulary

- A (library) **catalogue:** This is where all holdings of a library are listed and indexed (books – i.e. monographs, edited volumes – journals, newspapers, multimedia etc.). Note: A catalogue does not replace a database search. Knowing your way around the catalogue as well as the relevant databases for your studies is essential, as they provide different services and complement each other.
    o For the UB & all institutional libraries at the University of Basel, you use the "swisscovery Basel" interface: https://basel.swisscovery.org

- A **meta-catalogue:** This is a catalogue that collects data from various smaller/individual library catalogues. Great resource for a more widespread search & for interlibrary loans.
    o If you want to search the holdings of over 470 Swiss academic libraries, you can either select "swisscovery" from the dropdown menu in the search bar or select this option in the "Advanced Search" ("Erweiterte Suche") interface
    o By selecting "Central Discovery Index (CDI)" you can browse the library's electronic holdings and e-resources.[2]

➔ Make sure you're always logged in to your library account (with your Switch Edu-ID) when searching the catalogue – otherwise you might not see all available resources.

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[1] I try to keep it up to date but please don't hesitate to contact me if you feel something's missing.
[2] Note: This feature is best used if you know exactly what you're looking for (e.g. a specific article), rather than using it to search for literature.

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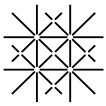
- A **database:** This is where articles, journal & book chapters, reviews etc. are listed.
  - o **Full-text database:** provides the full text, as well as the abstract and bibliographical information of a publication.
  - o **Abstract/citation database:** provides the bibliographical information of a publication, sometimes enriched with keywords/subject headings and/or abstracts.

➔ Note: A catalogue search does not replace a database search (or vice versa). It's important to familiarise yourself with and use both when searching literature for your papers/theses.

- **Subject headings** (in German: "Schlagwort" or "Thema"): Words or terms to describe the topic or content of a book/an item, always taken from a standardised vocabulary (thesaurus) and usually added by librarians.

- **Keywords:** Words or terms usually taken from an abstract or the bibliographical details, generally added by the authors or publishers and not taken from a standardised vocabulary.

Types of literature – what can you find in which resource?

- **(Critical) text editions:** Primary literature. Good starting point for your literature search as it often contains a bibliography, short articles on the text, and other notes.
- **Dictionaries / Reference works:** To look up (reliable) definitions, help to define your terminology and/or provide a quick overview of a topic – often with a short bibliography or further citations.
- **Monographs (i.e. books)** either by a single author or edited volumes: Secondary literature that provides in-depth analyses on (usually) one key topic/concept.
- **Essays / Articles:** Shorter form of academic literature; the discussion is very focused on (usually) one specific aspect of a topic/concept. May serve as a first foray into said topic, preparing for a later monograph.
- **Reviews** (of monographs): Published in journals. A not-to-be-underestimated resource to give you an overview of whether a monograph is relevant/worth your time or not.
- **Abstracts:** A brief overview/summary of an article or monograph. Essential to determine whether the item in question deserves more of your time or not.

Tips and things to keep in mind when searching the UB's resources for your literature

- **E-Media are not always listed in the catalogue straightaway**
  - o Sometimes it takes several weeks for the catalogue to synchronise with the newest e-media acquisitions. That means that the UB typically has more resources available than are visible in the catalogue alone. If you're on the lookout for a specific title/article, it is thus always advisable to quickly check the publishers' websites/e-book library to see whether you might have access to it after all – even if it does not (yet) show up in the catalogue.
  - o Some (but by no means all) of the publishers that are always worth checking out:
    - ▪ [De Gruyter](#) (the UB has currently access to all of their publications)
    - ▪ [Wiley Online Library](#)
    - ▪ [Springer Link](#)

- Don't forget to search on platforms that provide **Open Access content** (e.g. DOAJ, DOAB, OAPEN) – again, it will take time for publications of these platforms to be synchronised with the catalogue (or sometimes won't be picked up by swisscovery at all)
  - o I've linked to some OA platforms on the subject page for [Anglophone Linguistics & Literary Studies](#)
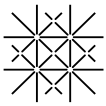
o   For more information on Open Access and OA Publications, see their corner of the UB's website [here](#).

- **Searching for literature takes time and determination.** Don't be discouraged if it takes time – you won't manage to assemble a completed reading list after a short casual rummage through the catalogue and databases.
    o   Stay on it, **be persistent,** experiment with your search queries, try out different approaches, alternate keywords and look up subject headings, think around corners and don't rely on finding everything you need on the first 1-2 pages of hits with your first search terms.

2. Search Strategies

Some basic terminology to amp up your literature search

In order to **get the most out of your literature search,** there are a couple of tips and tricks to help you narrow down or expand your search results. Whenever you search for literature, keep in mind that it's always precision vs. recall:

- **Precision:** A narrow, very specific search yields a smaller amount of search results. Nevertheless, they are more likely to be relevant to your topic. You are, however, also more likely to miss out on something that does not fall into the narrowing search terms.
- **Recall:** A broad search yields a wider range of results and covers more ground on a certain topic. You might catch something important that you wouldn't have found with a narrower search term. However, this is, of course, also more likely to yield a lot of irrelevant and useless results.

Boolean Operators: These little words can be used with catalogue and database searches, as well as with almost every search engine.

- **AND** → This is usually the default setting in any search engine. It narrows down your results to those that **contain all search terms** (though not necessarily in that order).
    o   E.g. horror AND literature will yield everything that contains both those terms.
    o   If you want to narrow it down even more and/or want to **search for terms in a specific order**, **put your phrase in quotation marks** ("") → e.g. "horror literature", if you want to specifically search for this genre.

- **OR** → This widens your search as the results may **contain either of the terms**.
    o   E.g. horror OR literature yields all results that contain either the term "horror" or the term "literature".
    o   You can also use this to prevent missing some results due to spelling variants:
        ▪   E.g. "color theory" OR "colour theory"
        ▪   In combination: ("color theory" OR "colour theory") AND Goethe

- **NOT** → This will, again, narrow down your results by **excluding certain terms.**
    o   E.g. horror NOT literature will yield anything containing horror but not in context to literature.

- **Truncations / Wildcards** → These are signs – usually *, !, ? or # – that can stand in for one or several letters. You will normally find which signs are used in the FAQs/search help of the database/catalogue. The asterisk (*) and question mark are pretty standard, though.
    o   * is a placeholder that can stand for any number of letters. E.g. "linguis*" will yield results with linguistics, linguists, linguistically etc.
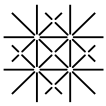
- ○ **?** or **#** is a placeholder that stands for one letter within a word. E.g. "c?t" will show records containing cat, cot, or cut.

General tips and tricks for your literature search

- **Don't write whole sentences** (unless you know the exact title of something) for more/better search results. Use keywords and/or subject terms.
  - ○ When working with databases, try to find out whether they use a standardised vocabulary (thesaurus) and use that to get more accurate search results.

- **Be as generic as necessary and as specific as possible** with your keywords/subject terms. E.g. don't search for "linguistics" if you want to write a paper on a topic in "cognitive linguistics".

- Play around with your search terms and **try different approaches using synonyms** or related words. E.g. check for both "Shakespearean drama" as well as "Shakespearean plays" or even "Elizabethan drama".
  - ○ Create a mind map for your search: What are the generic terms? What are more specific terms? Are there technical words/jargon in your area of research? Can you rephrase your queries to get different results?
  - ○ Also note down the keywords and subject headings you encounter in your searches and use them.

- Try searching from the **outside in** or from the **inside out**:
  - ○ **Outside in**: Start with generic terms to get an overview and from there gradually narrow down your search. This method works especially well when you're new to a topic or don't yet know on which aspect(s) you want to focus.
  - ○ **Inside out**: Start out specific and then gradually work your way outwards to find more and connect the aspect you're interested in to a bigger context. This works great when you have a really good source text (e.g. a recent article on the topic) that you can use as a starting point.

- **Use the bibliographies or citations** in useful articles and books you've already found as a jumping-off point for further searches on the topic.
  - ○ Also useful for cross-checking references: Chances are that if an article or book is cited in a lot of other publications on the same topic, there's probably some metaphorical meat on this text's bone and it's worth having a look at it (citation databases, for example, are invaluable for this!).

- **swisscovery doesn't tolerate typos** → If you feel like you should get a clear result but don't get any records or only very little, check your spelling.

Are your results **CRAAP**? (Hint: they should be!)

To find out whether your literature is useful, it's important to check whether it's **CRAAP**. This stands for:

- **C**urrency → Timeliness of information
  - ○ When is it from? Is this information current or outdated?
- **R**elevancy → Importance for your needs
  - ○ Does this help answer your question? Who/which target group is it for? Is the language and information suitable to and appropriate for your topic?
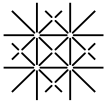
- **A**uthority → Source of the information
    - o Who wrote/published it? Are they an expert in the field/do they have the necessary qualifications? Are they affiliated with an institution/organisation/university that has credentials?
- **A**ccuracy → Reliability, Correctness & Truthfulness of the information
    - o What are the sources of the information & are they reliable? Can the information be verified? Are there references or a bibliography? Are there grammatical mistakes and/or typos?
- **P**urpose → Intention of the publication
    - o What is the publication for? What does the author want/intend with the information? Is the information presented in an objective and impartial manner? Is the author biased?

The CRAAP-test was devised by the Meriam Library at the California State University. For a more detailed overview, have a look at their leaflet.

Feel like something important is missing from the UB's offerings?

You can send an acquisition request – the respective subject librarian will be happy to help you get your literature – and for all other subject-specific inquiries, please don't hesitate to get in touch with me: johanna.schuepbach@unibas.ch