Not finding the literature that you need? Tips and tricks.

Searching for some topics feels like a thankless task. If you can find just one article, you have a starting point. But what if you can’t find that article?

Here are some key questions to ask, and some tips and tricks to get you on your way.

What are you finding?

If you’ve found lots of articles you can afford to be more specific: add in additional keywords to focus down your search. If you’ve found hardly any articles, you may need to be less specific: use fewer or more generic keywords. Don’t be put off if the articles that you find don’t describe the exact context you’re studying. A study looking at a different country or application may still offer ideas which are relevant to your own work.

How are you searching?

You may need to experiment with your keywords. The best keyword is a word or phrase which will always appear in an article on your topic, and never appear in an article which isn’t on your topic.

A common mistake is including generic keywords like ‘issues’ in your search. Most articles will mention issues, not always using the same words, so the keyword won’t narrow down your results.

A good keyword search is simple (just a few keywords, so you can see how each word affects your results) and distinctive (the keywords only appear in relation to your topic).

Some databases label articles with subjects (often known as 'Subject Terms' or 'Subject Headings') which can give you ideas for good keywords to use.

Where are you searching?

Check the Subject Guides for a list of databases: each will give you different results. Each database has a short description of the subject areas it covers best.

Some databases cover broad disciplinary areas (e.g. Science or Social Sciences), while others are more focused. No one database covers all journal articles.

Finding one article (or book, book chapter or report) will give you ideas for further keywords to use in your search, and the reference list will suggest other materials to use.
When are you searching?
Although making your research topical is a good idea, you are unlikely to find journal articles on recent events or policy development.

This is because it's common for creation, submission and acceptance of journal articles to take **months or even years**. A topic will often reach the academic literature long after it has been discussed in the popular press.

I still can't find anything!
If you've tried different combinations of keywords in all the databases that look relevant, and still can't find anything, you may need specialist help. Your **subject librarian** can help you improve your search, while your **tutor or supervisor** will have a good awareness of what has or hasn't been published in their field, and may be able to identify specialist terminology or key authors you could use to search.

Occasionally you may need to **refocus your question** to cover an area that has a stronger history of prior research.

As an alternative to searching for current events, search for journal articles on theory you can apply to understanding those events, or look for similar events from the past.