LITERATURE SEARCHING

Most research requires that the previously published literature in the field is examined and reference made to it where appropriate. It is therefore important to be able to locate and make critical use of the available sources.

Define the subject

- What is the title of the research project?
- What are the specific objectives of the research project?
- What are the main concepts or ideas involved?

Compile a list of keywords

Think of the ‘search terms’ that can be used:-

- Are there any alternative spelling for your keywords? Include synonyms and alternative words and use a thesaurus if necessary.
- Are there any broader (more general) keywords you could try if search results are low?
- Are there any narrower (more specific) keywords to use if the search produces too many references?

Organise the concepts and keywords

- Decide how the keywords are linked – what Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) to use. Related concepts/synonyms are searched with OR and different concepts with AND.
- Decide which concepts are most important and should be searched for first.
- You can make use of truncations, where an asterisk (*) at the end of a word tells the database to search all possible endings. You can also use quotation marks to search for a phrase, as in the example below.

Prioritise and limit your search

Should you place any limitations on you search by:-

- time period?
  Do you need only current information? For example - can you limit your search to only information published in the last 5 years?
- language?
  Must all your material be in English only?
- publication types?
  Can you limit your search to use or exclude certain types of publication - theses, conferences, statistics, Government reports, patents etc.?

Snowballing

If you find an article that is perfect for your research, then look at the bibliographic details for that article and check the assigned indexed terms. This can give you ideas of keywords and subjects headings to use in your search.
Decide which sources to search

- Are you using the most appropriate source of information? The LibGuide in your subject is a good place to start. Try the key databases, the recommended databases if they look relevant, and perhaps also databases listed in related subject guides.

Refine the search

- Are you finding too much or too little relevant information? You may need to consider other keywords?

Evaluate the references

Read the abstract if there is one, and evaluate the other information given:

- Is the subject matter relevant?
- Is the article in a language that you can read?
- Is it too advanced or too introductory? etc.

Know when to stop searching!

Record full details of the references that you find useful - ask your lecturer for information on the citation style you should use. Go to the LRC referencing pages, http://www.qmu.ac.uk/lb/Referencing/, for information on referencing and links to the QMU Write and Cite guide to BS Harvard 2010 or the QMU Guide to the APA Style of Referencing.
Using your own research project title, define a draft search strategy as follows:

1. Define your topic. What concepts or ideas are involved?

2. List the keywords or search terms that you can use - what different ways are there to express the concepts in your project? Include synonyms or alternative words, alternative spellings etc.

3. List any broader (more general), or narrower (more specialised) concepts to try, if you find too little or too much information.

4. Are there any priorities or limitations that you can apply to your search? Do you want only recently published information? Or can you limit your search by publication type? Or only to English language material?

5. Decide which of the electronic resources will be the most useful for your project research. Why have you decided to try these particular sources?

6. Are there any special sources or types of information that you will need for your project e.g. statistics, standards, legislation? What are they? Do you know how to find them?