# Managing Your Reading

Reading is usually, or should usually, be the starting part for any research topic. It is possible to come up with ideas about areas to research and subjects of interest, but to develop focus and refine these ideas in a measured way and to make sure that the research questions or hypotheses are appropriate, preliminary and formative reading behind the topic is part of the ongoing and iterative process of research.

It is not so long ago that the main sources of secondary data were books and journals. Today, with the development of electronic resources, sources of secondary data can be extended to include:

* Books
* Journals
* Conference papers
* Academic websites
* Statistics from a variety of different sources
* Government sites and reports
* Organisational websites
* Magazines, newspapers and specialist publications and their archives
* Portals that lead to full text articles and abstracts
* Electronic databases
* Electronic sources, YouTube and other forms of new media.

The list is almost endless, and the range, types and emphasis upon different forms of media changes from year to year. The real problem today is often not finding the right data, but actually making sure that you are reading the best data available. With new information constantly appearing alongside an ever-changing media, it is almost impossible to research everything related to a particular project. It is important that seminal sources or major studies are accessed.

There are various phases of the research process:

1. *Familiarity with sources of information -* Before doing anything, it is useful for you to familiarise yourself with the range and sources of literature that are available. This could involve talking to a librarian, and many courses where dissertations or projects are a requirement provide a session of some description with the librarian. Finding out about the avenues of research is really helpful as you are likely to find out about access to different gateways of information, such as portals to journals. You are also likely to learn about the sort of hierarchy into which much of the secondary data that you collect could fall. That is, at the top of the hierarchy would perhaps be academic journals, while towards the bottom would be too much emphasis upon information within the media.
2. *Setting keywords for the search* – So having come up with the research question or hypothesis, what areas do you research? There are a number of different ways of doing this. One is to identify a range of keywords associated with your research topic and use the various search engines and electronic sources to look for data associated with these key words. Sometimes a thesaurus can help in identifying different related words. Sometimes databases have their own form of thesaurus that allows you to develop your search. Another way to develop keywords is to use relevance trees. Starting with one word or concept, a number of branches may be developed from that word or concept. As you plough through the research, and read or look at the various sources that are bubbling up, you may wish to get rid of some key words. A literature search is an organic evolving process that never finishes during the lifetime of a research project. Sometimes when you find a new article or piece of research, the most useful thing that you can do is to look at the reference list in order to chase new sources of information.
3. *Selecting the search tools* - Using a range of electronic research tools, the next thing to do is simply search, search and search again using the keywords for library catalogues, archives and electronic portals.
4. *Locating the information* - As we have seen, information and data may come from various sources, from databases to libraries, and even government websites. The search can take a considerable time.
5. *The pecking order of information* - There is a sort of information hierarchy. Journal articles would be at the top, particularly if the articles were seminal and of huge value. Books are, of course important, but when you get to the realms of magazines and newspapers the data lose some of their value. This is something that you should emphasise as you contextualise the sources.
6. *Keeping records* - Having got copies of articles, or borrowed books from libraries, what do you do as you read through the data? Different researchers have different learning styles and ways of working with information. Some like to take photocopies of articles and chapters and then use a coloured highlighter to identify the main points as they read through the data. Others might simply read through a chapter making a list of key quotations and points, alongside a reference that can be used later.
7. *Managing information* - It is possible to get too much information, and then when you have got it you have to decide what to do with it. Having too much data can be a real problem.
8. *Keeping records* - As you manage the information, you need to keep records of your articles and the reading you have undertaken, and also think about how the information you have collected can be used to match and develop your research questions and hypotheses.