Literature searching:

Documenting your search

[Based on Leeds University]

Documenting your search strategy will enable you to demonstrate that you have undertaken a systematic process in identifying the literature you have included in your review.

It is important that you keep a record of where you looked for information, why you chose those particular sources, your search strategy, how you refined your initial results and selected your final materials.

It will help convince your readers that you have not missed any significant sources and will demonstrate that your review is rigorous and your conclusions valid.

You may be conducting your study over a number of years so documenting your search will make it easier to remember your results and justify the decisions you made at a later date when you are writing up your literature review.

It is useful to keep a record of your search activity in the form of a search activity template.

How much search activity should be recorded?

- Recording your initial searches for background information is not usually a requirement as it is unlikely that you will need to demonstrate how and where you found your references.

- On the other hand, however, for a thesis or systematic review it is often a requirement of your submission to provide a detailed record of your search process in which each stage in the process is documented.

Always check with your supervisor if you are uncertain as it is extremely difficult to retrace your search steps at a later date.

Writing up your search methodology

- Your account of your search history from beginning to end is an important part of your literature review. In the health fields this account is sometimes referred to as a facet analysis. It should demonstrate that you have been thorough, rigorous and systematic in your literature search and that your procedures are repeatable, auditable and transparent.

- Your search record should be clear and detailed enough to serve as an audit trail enabling the reader to replicate the search and arrive at the same (or similar results).
Presenting your search results

Presenting your results in the form of a table can be very helpful. You need to include the following elements:

- The name and provider of the sources you have used e.g. Cinahl accessed via the Ebsco platform or Web of Science via Thomson Reuters. You should also include any grey literature sources you used e.g. EThOS (online theses)
- The date you carried out the searches.
- The search limits you applied – e.g. language, date ranges, types of publication e.g. journal article, review, book chapter
- Individuals or organisations you have contacted
- Any sources you hand searched e.g. back files of journals.
- The search strategies that you applied when searching different sources (e.g. ScienceDirect, Web of Science) can be added as an appendix to your document. This may provide additional detail on:
  - How you searched (keyword and/or subject headings)
  - The search terms you used (which words and phrases)
  - Any search techniques you employed (truncation, adjacency, etc)
  - How you combined your search terms (AND/OR).

You should document in your results section the number of results you found in each source.

Tip! It is often easier to copy and paste the search history into your table straight from the database rather than retyping it.

Reference management

A useful way of recording your sources is to use a reference manager such as RefWorks. This helps you to keep a track of your references and helps you present them in the required UCS style.

Saving your search strategy

Many databases allow you create a personal login to enable you to save searches or set up alerts when new relevant content is added to the database.