

What is a Database?

You received your first research assignment and you've been asked to find scholarly journal articles. Your professor informs the class that you can find these articles in library databases.

So, what is a library database? In this short tutorial, you will learn about library databases and how you will choose one for your assignment.

The library purchases access to various multidisciplinary collections, called library databases, that are not available for free on the internet. However, you can access them from the library website! Library databases are organized to help you efficiently search for information sources such as scholarly journal articles, newspaper articles, magazines, reports, data, music, films, plays, and more.

There are many subject databases that search a specific area of study like chemistry, music, psychology, or business. There are also general databases that allow you to search interdisciplinary topics. And how do you choose a database?

First, check your assignment to locate the type of sources you need to complete your task. For example, your English final research paper requires you to find five scholarly journal articles. Therefore, you'll want to look for a database that includes academic articles.

Next, think of the subject areas that are related to your topic. If your topic is "Canadian identity," depending on your interest or most importantly your course/discipline, you could search databases with subject areas such as psychology, sociology, political science, music, history, etc. There are databases recommended for specific subjects. Choose databases that are relevant to your course and subject.

If you're starting your search with a broad topic like "Canadian identity," you don't necessarily need to begin with a discipline-specific database either. You could start your search in a more general/or interdisciplinary database. To locate many of these databases, select the "Popular Databases" list. Some examples would be JSTOR, Web of Science, or Scopus. When you are searching in general databases, be sure to select journals relevant to your assignment and subject matter. If you need help with selecting journal articles within general databases, ask a librarian or speak with your instructor or TA!

After finding some sources, you may find that you want to narrow your topic. For example, you may decide to investigate whether current Canadian identity supports gender diversity. You could select subject-specific databases in history, political science, sexual diversity studies, sociology, and women and gender studies. These are some example databases that you will find by selecting the subject areas on the Subjects A-Z list.

Found a resource in a U of T database and want to access it? Look for a PDF or GET IT! button to get full-text of the item.

Occasionally, you may find a resource we don't actually own at University of Toronto's Libraries. But, don't worry! If you find an interesting article, book, or other information source that isn't available at University of Toronto's Libraries, you can request it through interlibrary loan, which is also called ILL. ILL is a service that allows you to request books and articles from around the world with no additional charge. For more information, see our video on interlibrary loan and visit our website.

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