

## 16.3.2: Researching in the Library

The best source for information about how to find things in your library will come directly from the librarians who can answer your questions. But here is an overview of the way most academic libraries are organized and some guidelines for finding materials in the library.

On most campuses, the main library is a very prominent building, although some schools have several smaller libraries focused on particular subjects housed within other academic buildings. Almost all libraries have a **circulation desk**, where patrons can check out items. Most libraries also have an **information or reference desk** that is staffed with reference librarians to answer your questions about using reference materials, about the databases available for research, and other questions about finding materials in the library. Libraries usually have a place where you can make photocopies for a small cost and they frequently have computer labs available to patrons for word processing or connecting to the Internet.

Many libraries still have a centralized area with computer terminals that are connected to the library's computerized databases, though increasingly, these terminals are located throughout the building instead of in one specific area. (Very few libraries still actually have card catalogs, and when they do, these catalogs are usually for specialized and small collections of materials.) You will want to get familiar with your library's database software because it will be your key resource in finding just about anything in the building.

Libraries tend to have particular reading rooms or places where they keep current newspapers and periodicals, and where they keep bound periodicals, which are previous editions of journals and magazines bound together by volume or year and kept on the shelf like books. Many libraries also have specialized areas where they keep government documents, rare books and manuscripts, maps, video tapes, and so forth.

How do you find any of these things in the library? Here are some guidelines for finding books, journals, magazines, and newspapers.

### Books

You will need to use the library's computerized catalog to find books the library owns. Most library database systems allow you to conduct similar types of searches for books. Typically, you can search by:

**Author or editor.** Usually, this is a "last name first" search, as in "Krause, Steven D." If you are looking for the name of a writer who contributed a chapter to a collection of essays, try using a "key word" search instead.

**Title.** Most library databases will allow you to search by typing in the complete title or part of the title.

**Key word.** This is different from the other types of searches in that it is a search that will find whatever words or phrases you type in.

Whatever you type into a key word search is what you're going to get back. For example, if you typed in "commercial fishing" into a key word search, you are likely to get results about the commercial fishing industry, but also about "commercials" (perhaps books about advertising) and about "fishing" (perhaps "how to" books on fly fishing, or a reference to the short story collection *Trout Fishing in America*).

Most library computer databases will allow you to do more advanced key word searches that will find phrases, parts of words, entries before or after a certain date, and so forth. You can also increase the quality of your results by doing more keyword searches with synonyms of the word or words you originally have in mind. For example, if you do a keyword search for "commercial fishing," you might also want to try searching for "fish farming," "fisheries," or "fishing industry."

**Library of Congress Subject.** Chances are, your university, college, or community college library arranges their books according to the same system used by the U.S. Library of Congress. (The other common system, the Dewey Decimal System, is sometimes the organizational system used at public libraries and high school libraries.) The Library of Congress system has a long but specific list of subjects that is used to categorize every item. For example, here are some Library of Congress subjects that might be of interest to someone doing research on the ethical practices of the pharmaceutical industry:

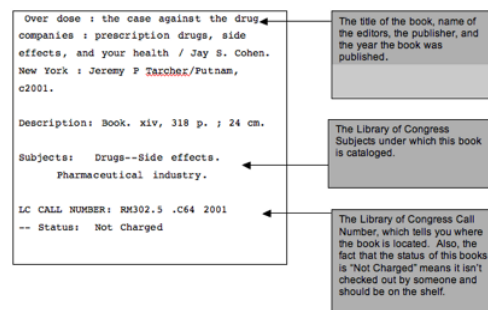
- Pharmaceutical ethics.
- Pharmaceutical ethics, United States.
- Pharmaceutical industry.
- Pharmaceutical industry, Corrupt practices, United States.

Each one of these categories is actually a Library of Congress subject that is used to categorize books and materials. In other words, when a new book on pharmaceuticals comes into the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., a librarian categorizes it according to previously determined subject categories and assigns the book a number based on that category. These “official” categories and the related Library of Congress Call Numbers (more on that in a moment) are the way that libraries that use the Library of Congress system keep track of their books.

**Call Number.** Most academic library database systems will allow you to search for a book with a particular call number. However, this feature is probably only useful to you if you are trying to find out if your library has a specific book you want for your research.

When you are first searching for books on a research idea or topic at your library, you should begin with key word searches instead of author, title, or subject searches. However, once you find a book that you think will be useful in your research, you will want to note the different authors and subjects the book fits into and search those same categories.

Here’s an example of a book entry from a library computer database with the most important parts of the entry labeled:



**Figure 16.3.2.1**

The “Subjects” information might be particularly helpful for you to find other books and materials on your topic. For example, if you did a subject search for “Drugs - Side effects,” you would find this book plus other related books that might be useful in your research.

In most university libraries, to retrieve this book, you need to find it on one of the book shelves, or, as they are often known, the “stacks.” This can be an intimidating process, especially if you aren’t used to the large scale of many college and university libraries. But actually, finding a book on a shelf is no more complicated than finding a street address.

The Library of Congress Call Number—in this example, RM 302.5 .C64 2001—is essentially the “address” of that book within the library. To get to it, you will first want to find out where your library keeps the books. This might be very obvious in many libraries, and not at all obvious in others. When in doubt, check with a librarian.

The Library of Congress Call Number system works alphabetically and then numerically, so to find the book in our example, you need to find the shelf (or shelves) where the library keeps books that begin with the call letters “RM.” Again, this will be very obvious in many libraries, and less obvious in others. At smaller academic libraries, finding the location of the “RM” books might be quite easy. But at some large academic libraries, you might need to find out what floor or even what building houses books that begin with the call letters “RM.”

If you were looking for the book in our example (or any other with a call number that began with “RM”), you can expect it to be somewhere between where they keep books that begin with the call letters “RL” and “RN.” Once you find where the “RM”s are, you’ll need to find the next number, 302.5. Again, this will be on the shelf numerically, somewhere between books with a call number that begins with “RM 302.4” and “RM 302.6.” By the time you get to this point, you are getting close. Then you’ll want to locate the “.C64” part, which will be between “.C63” and “.C65,” then the next “.D7”, and then finally the 2001.

If you go to the shelf and are not able to locate the book, there are three possible explanations: either the book is actually checked out, you have made a mistake in looking the book up, or the library has made a mistake in cataloging or shelving the book. It’s very easy to make a mistake and to look for a book in the wrong place, so first double-check yourself. However, libraries do make mistakes either by mis-shelving an item or by not recording that it has been checked out. If you are sure you’re right and you think the library has made a mistake, ask a librarian for help.

**One last tip: when you find the book you are looking for, take a moment to scan the other books on the shelf near it.** Under the Library of Congress system, books about similar subjects tend to be shelved near each other. You can often find extremely interesting and useful books by looking around on the shelf like this.

## Journals, Magazines, and Newspapers

Libraries group journals, magazines, and newspapers into a category called “periodicals,” which, as the name implies, are items in a series that are published “periodically.” Periodicals include academic periodicals that are perhaps published only a few times a year, quarterly and monthly journals, or weekly popular magazines. Newspapers are also considered periodicals.

## Periodical Indexes

Your key resource for finding articles in periodic materials for your research project will be some combination of the many different indexes that are available. There are hundreds of different indexing tools, so be sure to ask the librarians at your library about what resources are available to you.

Many indexes are quite broad in their scope—*The Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature* and the online resources *ArticleFirst* and *WilsonSelect* are common examples—while others are quite specific, like *The Modern Language Association Bibliography* (which covers fields like English, Composition and Rhetoric, and Culture Studies, not to mention studies in other languages) and *ABI/INFORM* (which indexes materials that have to do with business and management).

***It is crucial that you examine different indexes as you conduct your research: different indexes will lead you to different articles that are relevant for your research idea or topic.***

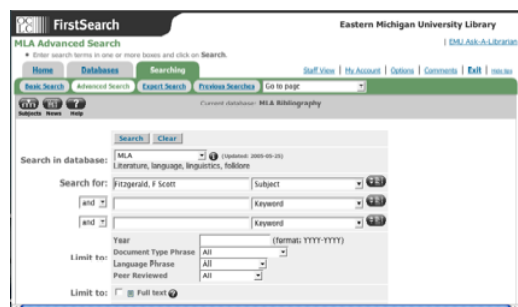
While indexes frequently overlap with each other, using different indexes will give you a wider variety of results. Some library computer systems make this easy to do by allowing you to search multiple indexes at the same time. However, not all libraries have this capability and not all indexes will allow for these kinds of searches.

Most periodical indexes have gone the way of the card catalog and are now available electronically. How these electronic databases work varies, but typically patrons can search by keyword or author, and sometimes by subject (though “subject” in these online databases isn’t necessarily as strict as the “subject” used in the Library of Congress system). A few indexes are still only available in “paper” form and these tend to be kept in library reference areas.

## Database interfaces: differences and similarities

As I’ve mentioned previously, there are too many differences between library databases to provide too many details about how to use them in this chapter. You may have already noticed this in your own experiences with databases in your library.

Some of these differences can be rather confusing. For example, a “subject search” for a book in a database that uses the Library of Congress cataloging system is not at all the same as a “subject search” with a periodical database like *WilsonSelect*.



**Figure 16.3.2.2** - This is the search screen of the “FirstSearch” database system. While this particular example is of the MLA database, all of the databases supported by FirstSearch use a similar search screen. However, different database systems will have different search screens with different options and commands.

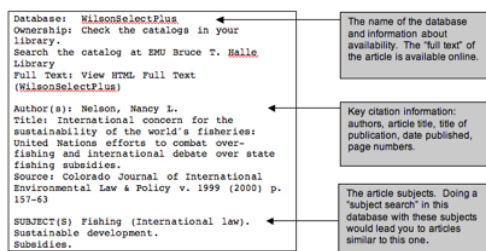
Fortunately, there are two common features with just about any library search software tool that will aid you in your research:

- **Author** searches, which almost always works the same in different databases; and
- **Keyword** searches. Keyword searches usually allow for different Boolean search functions. In some databases, you need to indicate that you are searching for a phrase. This is often done with putting quotes around a phrase: “space shuttle” will find just

that phrase; without quotes, it will find all occurrences of the keywords space and shuttle. Some keyword searches also allow a “not” function. For example, shuttle NOT space would exclude keyword references to the space shuttle. Boolean searches also usually allow for “and/or” searches: “Hillary and/or Bill Clinton” would return information about Hillary Clinton, Bill Clinton, and information that was about both Hillary and Bill Clinton.

Indexes typically provide the key information a reader needs to make some judgment about a periodical article and the information about where to actually find the article: the title of the publication, the title of the article, the name of the author, the date of publication, and the page numbers where the article appears. Sometimes, indexes also provide abstracts, which are brief summaries of the article that can also let readers know if it is something they are interested in reading.

Here is an example of a typical entry from a periodical index resource; specifically, this example is a portion of an entry from the online database Wilson Select Plus:



**Figure 16.3.2.3**

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