

How good are you at the moment?

Do you have a clear understanding of what types of source material are required to complete coursework?

Yes: You have a clear idea of the range of authoritative academic and professional sources, including textbooks and journal articles, and when and how to use each.

No: You are not sure what is available to you in the library, through the Library and what is trustworthy on the internet. You are also not sure how or when to use each type of source.

Do you know how to use source materials when preparing a coursework?

Yes: You know to approach source materials with a well-thought out plan of what you are looking for so you can read efficiently. You can read critically, questioning what you are finding out. You can also judge the different arguments you research and reach your own conclusions, identifying evidence to support what you are writing.

No: You often find yourself reading for a long time without a clear idea what you are hoping to find out, and finish feeling as though you have not learnt much more. You rarely question what you are reading, tending to accept the author's arguments as true.

Do you know how to choose appropriate source material?

Yes: You know that not all source material will be appropriate to use and that you need to consider how trustworthy your source material might be, thinking about whether it is still up-to-date, whether it is an academic source reviewed by other academics or a reliable professional source. You know that some sources cannot be used without care, such as company websites that are as much about promoting the company as providing information.

No: You tend to use whatever sources are easiest to find without thinking carefully whether you can trust them – whether they are up-to-date, whether they are objective, whether the arguments are supported by other authors.

Do you know what plagiarism is?

Yes: You know that plagiarism is when you do not make it absolutely clear to your reader that you are using other people's work.

No: You are not sure what plagiarism means or how you might avoid being accused of it.



The main points

Researching for assessment has a particular procedure which involves first, working out what you are being asked to do and then, using research skills to gather information that will answer the assessment question with adequate description and analysis.

When gathering information for research you should use peer-reviewed sources. You can achieve this by exclusively using journals, academic books, e-books and websites that are peer reviewed. If you use other types of sources, make sure you have reasons to trust them as objective and up to date.

You should search for specific information and not become overloaded with reading through too much material or gathering a mass of facts for no clear purpose. Identify keywords that you need to find explanations or definitions for and questions that you need answers to.

Student Academic Support

Find us on level 2 of the library.

Appointments available or drop by for quick questions

Mondays to Fridays, 10am to 4pm.

Find us on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Blackboard.

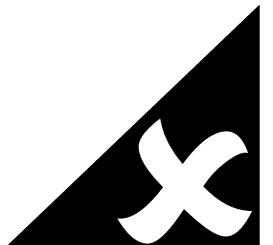
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How did you do?



If you answered 'yes' to all or most of the questions then you have a good idea of the range of source materials that you should be using and how to make the most of it. This handout might give you more advanced tips to help you to hone your research skills.

If you answered mainly 'no' to the questions then this handout will help you to improve how you research topics, using a better range of source materials.



Want more?
Other guides available on Blackboard from Student Academic Support that you might find useful:

- Getting started with coursework.
- Taking good notes.
- Referencing and avoiding plagiarism.

Online:

- **LearnHigher** is a great starting point, full of excellent resources to develop all aspects of your approach to learning - including printable timetables, coursework planners, and more.
<http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/students.htm>
- **Fullerton:** Advice on keeping a research log.
<http://bit.ly/nxLm28>
- **Owl at Purdue:** A guide to producing an annotated bibliography.
<http://bit.ly/nqFpUW>

At Abertay:

- Visit Student Services on level 2 of the library, including:
- **English as a foreign language:**
Amanda Shaw - a.shaw@abertay.ac.uk.
- **Advice for disabled students:**
Claire Allan - c.allan@abertay.ac.uk.



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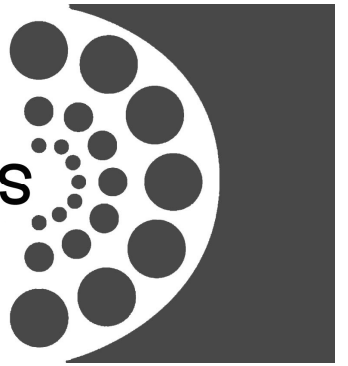
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How to practise.

- Break down your coursework question and work out what you are being asked to do:
 - What are the instruction words – eg ‘discuss’, ‘compare and contrast’, etc? What exactly are they asking you to do? Is it a more descriptive task or more critical and analytical?
 - What are the subject keywords? Make sure you pay attention to each keyword so you do not miss any out, either when you are researching or when you are writing. And make sure you plan ahead how you will deal with each keyword in turn, and then how you will deal with them together.
 - List the descriptive information you need to search, such as basic definitions and outlines of general subject areas. To keep your research organised and methodical, draw up a list of keywords, those in the coursework task and others that you know you need to find out more on.
- From your list of keywords, you can know go to the library catalogue and journal / internet search engines to hunt for information that will help you understand the coursework task and subject area better.
- You can generally find this sort of descriptive information, such as explanations and definitions, from more general sources, such as textbooks.
- Then list the critical analytical information you need to research. To keep organised with this stage of your research, draw up a list of questions that you need to find answers to.
- Using sources you identified using your keywords, you can now start hunting for answers to the questions you have set yourself. Working this way helps you to focus on what specific information you need to discover and to remember why you are looking for it.
- Remember the range of sources readily available to you:
 - Electronic journals, available through the Library. You can search each journal separately, or you can search every journal at once. You can also search for journals in the subject guide web pages.
 - Use the same keywords to search the library database to look for books on the coursework s
 - subject
- You can also you use these keywords to search electronic e-book databases in the virtual library.
- Cut down on the number of items your searches return by combining keywords. There are other criteria you can use, such as setting a cut-off date so you do not risk looking at out-of-date sources, or just looking for authors you know are leaders of their field because they are the most commonly cited by tutors and other sources.
- The critical analysis should involve finding information or evidence that supports an argument, a theory or a theoretical perspective.
- While you are researching, keep meticulous records of all your sources, since you will need this information for referencing them when you write up your coursework.
- Do not get overloaded: always remember exactly what you wanted to find out and why you needed to find it out. Most of the time, you will not need to read whole textbooks or even whole journal articles. Use indexes, headings, sub-headings and any other clues to guide yourself through your reading to help you find the answers to your questions as quickly and efficiently as possible.
- Every time you make use of someone else’s work – either by quoting what they have written word-for-word, or by presenting their ideas in your own words – you must acknowledge that by referencing it. Use the **Referencing & Plagiarism handout** in this series for more information on how to reference. You can also look at the library reference guides available on the second level of the library or online on the library website. You can also use the library Blackboard to learn more about referencing your coursework.
- Do not be afraid to challenge what you are reading. Your tutors want to know what you think and need you to be critical while you research and to express your own ideas, supported by evidence, when you are writing.

Questions and answers.

What type of publication should you use for assessment at degree level?

You will be expected to use what are known as ‘peer reviewed’ materials more and more as you progress through your course. These are publications that have been reviewed by other experts or academics in the discipline that you are studying, such as journal articles, textbooks and educational websites. The reason for preferring peer-reviewed sources is that the information in them has been vetted by other scientists or academics working in the field and therefore contains information that is deemed reliable.

Instead of looking for journals and books, can I not just research for information using a search engine on the internet?

The problem with websites is that there is no guarantee that the information contained in them is reliable. Unlike peer-reviewed books and journals, a great number of websites are not peer reviewed, and you need to be very careful to check that the information is not incorrect, incomplete or biased towards a particular point of view. The only websites that you can safely use because they include peer-reviewed information are university or college websites written by academics for use by their students. Company or official government sites can also be seen as reliable if you are visiting them is to use them to obtain statistical information. However, always be careful that what you are reading is not, in fact, subjective promotional material presented as being objective and authoritative.

What type of academic information do you have to look for to complete courseworks?

There are roughly two categories of information required to answer assessment questions: information that is descriptive and information that is critical or analytical.

In searching for descriptive information you will have to find definitions, explanations and descriptions of the subject area you are writing about.

You will also have to search for information that is critical analytical, i.e. information that gives a point of view, evaluates, or analyses the pros and cons of an issue.

You will also need to think critically while you are reading and writing. What do you think about an issue? What evidence can you find to support your argument? Why do you think other authors who make different arguments are (completely or partly) wrong?

The balance between descriptive and critical or analytical information required for coursework will vary from task to task depending on what you are being asked to do. Expect, however, that every assessment will need you to discuss critical or analytical information to achieve a good mark.

What if I disagree with the author I am reading?

There is nothing wrong with disagreeing with what you are reading in your source material. In fact, it is a good sign that you are reading critically and thinking while you are researching. Remember, though to support your own ideas and arguments with evidence from the sources you have been using in your research.

What if there does not seem to be a ‘right’ answer?

Very few subjects have definite answers and a lot of the time you will be writing about a range of arguments, discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each, and then concluding with an analysis of what you think are the best points of each, with evidence to support your reasons.

