

CHAPTER 02: SELECTING INFORMATION SOURCES

Chapter Overview

Selecting appropriate information sources is a fundamental step in advanced documentary research. Once a research topic has been clearly defined and appropriately delimited, the next step is to identify and select the most relevant information sources. This selection process involves two complementary dimensions:

- **The type of document required:** This may include monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, academic theses and dissertations, research reports, conference proceedings, and other specialized documents.
- **The type of resource to consult:** These resources range from physical library catalogues and digital bibliographic databases to academic search engines and specialized scholarly portals.

The choice of information sources should always be guided by the precise nature of the research question and by the level of detail, reliability, and scientific rigor required by the study.

2.1. Types of Documents

The appropriate type of document depends directly on the level, scope, and nature of the information being sought. The main categories can be organized as follows:

Reference and In-depth Sources

- **Dictionaries and encyclopedias:** Useful for quickly understanding and defining fundamental concepts, terminology, and newly emerging expressions.
- **Books and monographs:** Provide a comprehensive and in-depth treatment of a particular subject and are essential for developing a thorough understanding of a field.
- **Textbooks and manuals:** Provide a structured and systematic presentation of a broad topic or an entire scientific discipline.
- **Handbooks and concise guides:** Provide a rapid and structured overview of a specific subject area and are particularly useful for initial orientation.

Specialized Academic Documents

- **Specialized works:** Examine a specific and often narrowly defined aspect of a scientific or technical question in considerable depth.

- **Conference proceedings:** Contain scientific papers, research presentations, and contributions presented at academic conferences, congresses, and symposia.
- **Academic journals and periodicals:** Provide access to recent research findings, empirical data, methodological developments, and current scientific advances.

Research and Technical Documents (Grey Literature)

- **Theses, dissertations, and research reports:** These documents are generally considered part of grey literature and may provide highly detailed scientific information on focused or specialized research topics.
- **Specific specialized documents:** These may include digital maps, patents, technical drawings, statistical records, technical documents, and other discipline-specific materials. Their usefulness depends on the objectives and methodology of the research.

Official Documentation

- **Official documentation** consists of legal, regulatory, administrative, and institutional documents formally issued by public authorities or governmental institutions.
- Examples include laws, decrees, regulations, public procurement documents, administrative decisions, and official public records.
- These sources are essential when the research concerns legal, regulatory, administrative, institutional, or governmental frameworks.

2.2. Types of Information Resources

The choice of an information resource depends primarily on the research topic and on the type of document being sought. Information resources can be organized into several major categories.

1. Library Catalogues: Library catalogues are essential multidisciplinary tools for identifying and locating books, printed documents, theses, periodicals, and other materials held by libraries.

Examples include university library catalogues, institutional collective catalogues such as **SUDOC**, international catalogues such as **WorldCat**, and national library catalogues such as that of the **Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF)**.

2. Bibliographic Databases: Bibliographic databases are structured collections of bibliographic references organized according to disciplines, subjects, or document types. They generally provide bibliographic records, abstracts, keywords, metadata, and, in some cases, links to the full text.

Examples of multidisciplinary databases include **JSTOR**, **DOAJ**, and **Web of Science** (formerly Web of Knowledge).

3. Factual Databases: Factual databases provide structured factual information, numerical data, records, or operational information that can be directly used by the researcher. Examples include **Le Maitron** and **Kompass**.

4. Text Corpora: Text corpora are organized collections of complete texts assembled according to a specific thematic area, linguistic corpus, historical period, or research objective. Examples include **Brepolis**, **Classiques Garnier**, and **EEBO**.

Classification of Academic Databases and Access Portals

Database Classification	Academic Examples and Domain Focus
Specialized Disciplinary Databases	LexisNexis, Doctrinal (Law); EconLit, Business Source (Economics); arXiv.org (Mathematics, Physics, Computer Science).
Full-Text Academic Repositories	Cairn, JSTOR, Persée, EconLit, Thèses.fr (Direct access to un-redacted scholarly texts).
Index-Only / Indexing Databases	Periodic, Francis, Pascal (Provide strict metadata, bibliographic abstracts, or partial/restricted text access).

2.2.4. Navigating Web Resources: Search Engines and Portals

Web resources are vast and continuously expanding. However, the academic quality and reliability of online information vary considerably, and web content may change, disappear, or become inaccessible over time. To reduce these risks, researchers should give priority to specialized academic search engines, scientific directories, and structured scholarly portals.

Specialized Academic Search Engines

- Google Scholar & Google Books
- Economics Search Engine (ESE) & Scirus
- Isidore (Humanities) & Thèses.fr (French Doctoral Theses)
- Profusion Chimie (Specialized Chemistry engine)

Web Directories

- Open Directory Project (DMOZ) – A historically important web directory that was organized and maintained by a large community of volunteer editors to classify and organize websites.

Scientific & Sovereign Portals

- **WorldWideScience:** A global gateway providing access to scientific information from different national and international sources.

- **Université en Ligne (UEL):** Provides scientific and educational resources.
- **Sciences.gouv.fr:** A French official portal providing access to scientific information and resources.
- **Légifrance:** The official French portal for legal texts, laws, regulations, and decrees.
- **International Centre for Scientific Research (CIRS).**

2.3. Evaluating the Quality and Relevance of Sources

Source evaluation is a critical stage of academic research. It enables researchers to determine whether the information collected is sufficiently reliable, accurate, relevant, and appropriate for use in a scientific study. A rigorous research project should be based on identifiable and reliable sources. Information whose author, institutional origin, or geographical context cannot be adequately established should be treated with caution and, when necessary, excluded from the research.

Core Analytical Pillars for Source Evaluation

Evaluation Pillar	Operational Requirements & Checklist
Credibility – Author and Publisher	Identify the author's qualifications, institutional affiliation, and academic expertise. Determine whether the author or work is recognized or cited in the relevant scholarly literature. Examine the nature of the hosting institution or website.
Accuracy and Verifiability	Check whether the information is supported by evidence, references, data, and a reliable bibliography. Cross-check important facts with other trustworthy sources. Verify that appropriate copyright and intellectual-property requirements are respected.
Purpose and Objectivity	Determine the purpose of the document. Is it intended to inform, report scientific findings, teach, advertise, sell, or persuade? Distinguish between primary research, educational material, professional information, and popularized science.
Currency and Timeliness	Check the publication date and, where applicable, the date of the most recent update. Determine whether the information is sufficiently current for the requirements of the research field.

Determining Document Relevance (Prior to Full Reading)

A source may satisfy the quality criteria and still be irrelevant to a specific research question. To save time, researchers should conduct a preliminary examination before reading the document in full. The following elements are particularly useful:

- **Document Title:** Examine the formal title to determine whether the subject corresponds to the research topic.
- **Abstract / Executive Summary:** Review the abstract or summary to obtain a rapid understanding of the purpose, methodology, and main findings.
- **Table of Contents / Index:** Examine the structure of the document to identify relevant chapters, sections, or keywords.
- **Tables, Figures, and Graphs:** Determine whether the visual and quantitative information can be useful as evidence, data, or explanatory material in the research.
- **Introduction and Conclusion:** Read these sections to identify the research problem, objectives, methodology, and principal conclusions.

2.4. Implementing an Automated Information Monitoring System (Literature Watching)

As academic research progresses, repeatedly conducting the same searches across numerous databases and search engines can become time-consuming and inefficient. Researchers are therefore encouraged to establish an automated information monitoring system, often referred to as **literature monitoring** or **literature alerts**.

This system allows researchers to receive automatic notifications about newly published documents, articles, reports, or other scientific materials related to a specific research topic. These alerts may be delivered through email, RSS aggregators, database notification systems, or personalized online dashboards.

To implement an effective monitoring system, the researcher should configure a **Research Profile** within each relevant database, publisher platform, or academic information service.

This profile may include the following elements:

- **Saving an optimized search strategy or Boolean search equation.**
- **Applying appropriate filters**, such as discipline, language, publication type, or publication date, to refine the results.
- **Subscribing to automated alerts** that provide new results on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis.