

Finding and Selecting Sources



Literature research is a methodical investigation to find key information (books, journal articles, reports, case studies, policy documents, conference proceedings, etc.) on the topic of a paper, whether it is a project, seminar, bachelor's, or master's thesis. By carrying out literature research, you determine what has already been studied on a topic and where research gaps exist. This enables you to build on existing knowledge and, where possible, draw your own conclusions. Additionally, literature research can be useful in familiarizing yourself with the topic, narrowing down the focus, and refining the research question.



An efficient search requires a plan. Here are 7 tips for successful literature research: (For further information, consult the Moodle course '[Literature research](#)', in English, and the [video series](#), in German, on this topic.)

1. *Define what you're searching for*

Before starting your literature search, familiarize yourself with your topic. Google Scholar, Wikipedia, and AI-tools such as ChatGPT can be good starting points. The goal is to get an overview of the topic, the various aspects of your research question, and the specialized terminology.

2. *Identify useful key words*

In many cases, search queries formulated as complete sentences and questions fail to provide useful results. Therefore, use key words when searching for literature. Gather terms that capture the main points of your research question and list synonyms, related terms, and English translations. [Reference works](#) and [word clouds](#) can assist in this process. If relevant, you may also include variations in spelling (e.g. British and American English, abbreviations) or word endings (e.g. plural and singular) in your list. The more precisely your key words match the subject discourse, the better results you will get.

3. *Let your topic guide you*

Depending on the topic, different sources might be suitable for finding good literature. In the library catalogue, [ZHAW swisscovery](#), you will find general literature that has been acquired by the university library for ZHAW courses. Furthermore, discipline-specific databases are the most effective way to search for relevant journal articles. You can find a list of key databases in the [discipline-specific information](#).

4. *Develop and refine your search strategy*

Combine important keywords or exclude non-relevant aspects from your search to avoid getting too many results. Use available filter options and advanced search features to refine your results. Whilst searching, scan the articles found for further key words that can enhance your search and look at their bibliographies for interesting publications. Make sure to [document your search](#) and save relevant publications. This will save you time when you need to revisit the sources later. (See also Tip 6: Literature Management.)

5. *Verify your sources*

Especially on the internet, content can be published without undergoing quality control or fact-checking. Make sure that your literature meets academic standards. Criteria for this can include the publication's date, the qualification of the author, the credibility of the publisher and the sources cited in the bibliography. Learn how to evaluate your sources using the [CRAAP test](#).

6. *Use a reference management software right from the start*

Manually listing all sources in your document is prone to errors and it is time-consuming. The free Zotero saves you this work. With Zotero, you can keep track of your literature, directly cite it in your document and generate a bibliography with a single click. Learn how the software works through [courses](#) offered by the university library or the documents in the Moodle course '[Literature management with Zotero](#)'.

7. *Ask the library team for help*

It can sometimes be the case that a search does not return any suitable results. Don't be discouraged. Research is a matter of trial and error. You are not alone. The library team is happy to help you with an [individual appointment](#).

