GLOSSARY OF RESEARCH TERMS

Excerpts from: Research and Documentation Online (5th Edition)

A

abstract

A summary of a work's contents. An abstract usually appears at the beginning of a scholarly or technical article. Databases and indexes often contain abstracts that can help you decide whether an article is relevant for your purposes.

annotated bibliography

A list of sources that gives the publication information and a short description — or annotation — for each source. Each annotation is generally three to seven sentences long. In some bibliographies, the annotation merely describes the content and scope of the source; in others, the annotation also evaluates the source's reliability, currency, and relevance to a researcher's purpose.

anthology

A collection of writings compiled into a book. The selections in anthologies are usually connected by a common topic, time period, or group of authors.

archives

A collection of documents and artifacts, usually unpublished, that constitute the organized historical record of an organization or of an individual's life. Many academic libraries house their institution's archives and may have other archival materials as well. *See also* **special collections**.

authentication

An online verification process that allows users to access library resources such as databases from off campus. Authentication generally requires logging in with a campus ID.

B

bibliography

(1) A list of sources, usually appearing at the end of a research paper, an article, a book, or a chapter in a book. The list documents sources used in the work and points out sources that might be useful for further research. Entries provide publication information so that interested readers can track down and examine sources for themselves. (2) A list of recommended readings on a given topic, usually sorted into subcategories.

blog

A blog (short for *Weblog*) is a site that contains dated text or multimedia entries usually written and maintained by one person, with comments contributed by readers. Though some blogs are personal diaries and others are devoted to partisan politics, many journalists and academics maintain blogs that cover topics of interest to researchers. Blogs frequently provide links to other sources.

Boolean operators

The words *and*, *or*, and *not* used in search queries to relate the contents of two or more sets of data in different ways. When search terms are combined with *and*, the search results contain only those items that include all the terms. When *or* is used, the results include items that contain any one of the terms. *Not* is used to exclude items containing a term.

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C

call number

The letter and number combination that indicates where a book is kept on a library's shelves. Call numbers are assigned using a system that locates books on the same subject next to one another for easy browsing. Most academic libraries use the Library of Congress (LC) system; public libraries typically use the Dewey decimal system.

catalog

A set of records for the location information and other details about materials owned by a library. Most catalogs are online, though a library may have all or part of its catalog on printed cards. Online catalogs usually can be searched by author, title, subject heading, or keyword; search results provide a basic description of the item (book, journal title, video, or other) and a call number. *See also* **call number**; **subject heading**.

citation

A reference to a book, an article, a Web page, or another source that provides enough information about the source to allow a reader to retrieve it. Citations in a paper must be given in a standard format (such as MLA, APA, *Chicago*, or CSE), depending on the discipline in which the paper is written.

citation management software

A computer program that stores bibliographic references and notes in a personal database and that can automatically format bibliographies, reference lists, or lists of works cited based on a particular documentation style (MLA, APA, *Chicago*, CSE, for example). Such programs may generate inaccurate or incomplete citations, so writers should proofread all results.

citation trail

The network of citations formed when a reference work refers to sources that in turn refer to other sources. The process used by researchers to track down additional sources on a topic is sometimes referred to as following the path of a "citation trail" or "citation network."

cite

(1) As a verb, to provide a reference to a source. (2) As a noun, a shortened form of *citation.* (*Note:* This term is frequently confused with *site*, as in *Web site*.)

corporate author

An organization, an agency, an institution, or a corporation identified as the author of a work.

D

database

A collection of information organized for retrieval. In libraries, databases usually contain references to sources retrievable by a variety of means. Databases may contain bibliographic citations, descriptive abstracts, full-text documents, or a combination.

descriptors

Terms assigned by compilers of a database to describe the subject content of a document. Descriptors are chosen so that all of the work on a particular topic can be found with a

single word or phrase, even though there may be many different ways of expressing the same idea. For example, the *PsycINFO* database uses *academic achievement* as a descriptor to help researchers locate texts on the subject of scholastic achievement or grade-point average. *See also* **database**; **subject heading**; **tags**.

digital object identifier (DOI)
: A persistent code assigned to online or digital material. The DOI can be entered into a Web site called a DOI resolver or used in a database to retrieve an item.

discipline
: An academic field of study such as history, psychology, or biology. Often books and articles published by members of a discipline and intended for other scholars are called *the literature of the discipline* — referring not to literary expression but to research publications in the field.

F

field
: (1) An area of study within an academic discipline. (2) A particular area in a database in which the same type of information is regularly recorded. One field in an article database may contain the titles of articles, for example, while another field may contain the names of journals the articles are in. Some search engines allow a user to limit a search to one or more specific fields.

full text
: A complete document contained in a database or on a Web site. (*Note:* Illustrations and diagrams may be omitted from a full-text document.) Some databases search full-text documents; others search only the citation or abstract. In some cases researchers can set their own preferences.

H

hits
: (1) The results called up by a search of a database, a Web site, or the Internet. (2) The number of times a Web site has been visited. Web site owners track hits as a measure of the popularity of a site.

holdings
: The exact items a library owns. The term typically refers to the specific issues of a magazine or journal in a library. This information is often listed in a library's catalog as a *holdings statement*.

I

index
: (1) In a book, an alphabetical listing of topics and the pages on which information about them can be found. The index is located at the back of the book. (2) A publication that lists articles or other publications by topic. (3) An alphabetical listing of elements that can be found in a database.

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J

journal

A type of periodical usually sold by subscription and containing articles written for specialized or scholarly audiences. *See also* **scholarly journal**.

K

keyword

A word used to search a library database, a Web site, or the Internet. Keyword searches locate results by matching the search word to an item in the resource being searched. Keyword searches often retrieve broad results through many database fields. However, researchers who perform a keyword search using terms that are different from those used by the database may not retrieve all of the information in the database related to their topic. For example, a search using the keyword *third world* will find items containing that term but may not include related items using the term *developing countries. See also* **descriptors**; **subject heading**; **tags**.

L

library catalog

See **catalog**.

licensed database

See **subscription database**.

literature review

An article or paper describing published research on a particular topic. The purpose of a literature review (sometimes called a *review article*) is to select the most important publications on the topic, sort them into categories, and comment on them to provide a quick overview of leading scholarship in that area. Published articles often include a literature review section to place their research in the context of other work in the field.

M

magazine

A type of periodical containing articles that are usually written for general and popular audiences. Magazines are sold on newsstands or by subscription and earn a part of their revenue through advertising.

microform

A process that reproduces texts in greatly reduced size on plastic film called *microfilm.* Flat sheets of microfilm are called *microfiche.* Both forms must be read on special machines that magnify the text.

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O

online catalog
: *See* **catalog**.

OPAC (online public access catalog)
: *See* **catalog**.

P

peer review
: Part of the publication process for scholarly publications in which a group of experts examines a document to determine whether it is worthy of publication. Journals and other publications use a peer review process — usually arranged so that reviewers do not know who the author of the document is — to assess articles for quality and relevance. *See also* **refereed publication**.

periodical
: A publication issued at regular intervals. Periodicals may be magazines, journals, newspapers, or newsletters. *See also* **serial**.

periodical index
: A list of all the articles that have been published in a magazine, journal, newspaper, or newsletter or in a set of periodicals. Many periodical indexes have been converted to online databases, though many online versions are limited to recent decades. For access to all years of a periodical's publication, you may need to consult a print index. The *MLA Bibliography*, for example, covers publications since 1963 in the online version, but the print version goes back to 1921.

plagiarism
: The unattributed use of a source of information that is not considered common knowledge. In general, the following acts are considered plagiarism: (1) failing to cite quotations or borrowed ideas, (2) failing to enclose borrowed language in quotation marks, (3) failing to put summaries or paraphrases in your own words, and (4) submitting someone else's work as your own.

popular
: Often used to refer to sources written for a general audience; not scholarly. *See also* **scholarly**.

primary source
: An original source, such as a speech, a diary, a novel, a legislative bill, a laboratory study, a field research report, or an eyewitness account. While not necessarily more reliable than a secondary source, a primary source has the advantage of being closely related to the information it conveys and as such is often considered essential for research, particularly in history. In the sciences, reports of new research written by the scientists who conducted it are considered primary sources.

professional journal
: A journal containing scholarly articles addressed to a particular professional audience such as doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, or accountants. Professional journals differ

from trade publications, which usually do not include in-depth research articles. *See also* **scholarly journal**; **trade publications**.

R

record
An entry in a database or a library catalog. Records contain the details about the books, articles, or other sources that users will find in a database.

refereed publication
A publication for which every submission is screened through a peer review process. Refereed publications are considered authoritative because experts have reviewed the material in advance of publication to determine its quality. *See also* **peer review**.

reference
(1) A source used in research and mentioned by a researcher in a paper or an article. (2) In libraries, a part of the library's collection that includes encyclopedias, handbooks, directories, and other publications that provide useful overviews, common practices, and facts. (*Note: Reference* may also indicate a desk or counter where librarians provide assistance to researchers.)

review article
See **literature review**.

RSS
Short for *rich site summary*, a system for collecting and viewing recent updates to Web sources such as blogs or news sites. These updates are often collected through personal accounts set up on sites such as *Bloglines* or *Google Reader*.

S

scholarly
Often used to describe books, periodicals, or articles that are written for a specialized audience of academics or researchers. These sources are generally formal in style and include references to other published sources. *See also* **popular**.

scholarly journal
A journal that is primarily addressed to scholars, often focusing on a particular discipline. Scholarly journals are often refereed publications and for some purposes may be considered more authoritative than magazines. Articles in scholarly journals usually are substantial in length, use specialized language, contain footnotes or endnotes, and are written by academic researchers rather than by journalists. *See also* **refereed publication; magazine**.

search engine
(1) A program that allows users to search for material on the Internet or on a Web site. (2) The search function of a database.

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secondary source

A source that comments on, analyzes, or otherwise relies on primary sources. An article in a newspaper that reports on a scientific discovery or a book that analyzes a writer's work is a secondary source. *See also* **primary source**.

serial

A term used in libraries to encompass all publications that appear in a series: magazines, journals, newspapers, and books that are published regularly (such as annual reviews). *See also* **periodical**.

special collections

A section of a library devoted to unusual or valuable materials that cannot be checked out, including rare books, artwork, photographs, posters, and pamphlets. Researchers are generally required to use these rare materials in a reading room with special assistance. Many rare materials are being scanned for easier access through digital archives or repositories. *See also* **archives**.

subject heading

A word or phrase assigned to an item in a database to describe the item's content. This content information can help a researcher evaluate whether a book or an article is worth further examination. Subject headings also suggest alternative terms or phrases to use in a search. Most academic library catalogs use the *Library of Congress Subject Headings* to describe the subjects of books in the catalog. Other databases create their own list, or thesaurus, of accepted descriptive terms. In some databases, subject headings are called *descriptors. See also* **descriptors**; **tags**; **thesaurus**.

subscription database

A database that can be accessed only by paying a fee. Most of the online materials that libraries provide free to their patrons are paid for by the library through a subscription. Often the material provided in a subscription database is more selective and quality-controlled than sources that are freely available on the Web. Because these databases are often provided through a license agreement, they are sometimes referred to as *licensed databases*.

T

tags

User-supplied words or phrases describing the subject of a document, image, or video. Tags are frequently used in social media forums such as *Flickr*. Unlike subject headings or descriptors used in databases, the wording of tags is often determined by individual users. *See also* **descriptors**; **subject heading**; **thesaurus**.

thesaurus

(1) A collection of words and synonyms. (2) In a database, a list of the subject headings or descriptors that are used in a particular catalog or database to describe the subject matter of each item. A thesaurus is useful to researchers because it identifies which term among available synonyms has been used by the database compilers to describe a topic. Some databases provide a searchable thesaurus that helps researchers choose the most effective search terms before they start searching.

trade publications

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Periodical publications, such as magazines or newsletters, covering specialized news and information for members of a particular profession or industry. Unlike scholarly journals, trade publications do not include in-depth research articles.

truncation

In search engine or database queries, a shortened version of a search term. In some search engines and databases, the truncated term plus a wildcard symbol (such as an asterisk or a question mark) can be used to search all possible variations of the word. *See also* **wildcard**.

U

URL (uniform resource locator)

An Internet address. Most URLs consist of a protocol type (such as *http*), a domain name and extension (such as *hackerhandbooks.com*), and a series of letters and/or numbers to identify an exact resource or page within the domain. Many electronic databases have long URLs that are generated in the course of a search and vary each time a search is conducted. In some cases, a database record may contain a "persistent URL" that can be used to locate the item again.

W

wiki

A collaborative Web site with content that is written by many contributors and that may change frequently. *Wikipedia*, a collaborative online encyclopedia, is one of the most frequently consulted wikis.

wildcard

A symbol used to substitute any letter or combination of letters in a search word or phrase. A wildcard may replace a single letter (as in *wom*n*, to search for *women* or *woman* in one search) or any number of letters (as in *psycholog** to search for *psychology*, *psychologist*, and *psychological*). Typical wildcard symbols are asterisks, question marks, and exclamation points. *See also* **truncation**.