

Gathering Background Information

Overview

This document explains how to map the landscape of your topic before diving into complex academic journals. Gathering background information helps you understand the context of your research, identify key theories, and discover the exact vocabulary used by professionals in your field.

Prerequisites

Before gathering background information, you should have:

- A [drafted research question](#) or a defined topic area.
- A basic understanding of your assignment requirements.

Why Background Information Matters

A common mistake in academic research is jumping straight into academic databases (like EBSCO or JSTOR) using everyday language. Peer-reviewed journal articles are highly specific; they assume the reader already understands the broader context, history, and terminology of the field.

If you do not gather background information first, you risk retrieving irrelevant results, misunderstanding complex articles, or missing the most important sources because you did not use the correct academic keywords.

Step-by-Step Guide to Background Research

Step 1: Consult Subject-Specific Reference Works

Instead of general web searches, start with academic reference materials. These include subject encyclopaedias, dictionaries, handbooks, and foundational textbooks. They provide verified, broad overviews of concepts, movements, and theories.

- **[For Architecture and Interior Design](#)**: Look for architectural dictionaries, compendiums of building typologies, or overviews of design movements (e.g., Brutalism, Bauhaus). You might also need to look at visual precedents, floor plans, or case studies of similar buildings.
- **[For Graphic Design](#)**: Seek out histories of typography, visual communication handbooks, and monographs of influential design studios.
- **[For Business Administration](#)**: Consult business handbooks, industry overviews, and glossaries of economic terms to understand market contexts and management frameworks.

Step 2: Mine for Academic Keywords

Professionals and academics use specific jargon. As you read reference works, write down the exact terms used to describe your topic. You will need these keywords later to build your database search strategy.

- *Everyday term*: "Green building"

- *Academic keywords to harvest:* "Sustainable architecture", "biophilic design", "passive cooling", "LEED certification".
- *Everyday term:* "Selling online"
- *Academic keywords to harvest:* "E-commerce consumer behaviour", "omnichannel retail", "digital marketing strategy".

Step 3: Identify Key Authors and Precedents

Background reading will frequently mention the most important figures or examples related to your topic. Note these down.

- **Theorists and Scholars:** Are there specific authors whose names appear repeatedly? They are likely foundational to your topic.
- **Case Studies and Precedents:** If you are researching adaptive reuse in architecture, background reading will highlight classic examples (like the Tate Modern or Zeche Zollverein). These precedents are excellent search terms for finding detailed literature later.

Step 4: Use Wikipedia Strategically

Wikipedia is an excellent tool for pre-research, but it comes with strict limitations in higher education.

The Golden Rule of Wikipedia: Wikipedia is a great place to start your research, but a terrible place to end it. Never cite Wikipedia in a university assignment or thesis.

Use Wikipedia to get a fast overview of an unfamiliar topic, learn basic definitions, and harvest keywords. Most importantly, scroll to the "References" section at the bottom of the Wikipedia page; these links often point to credible books, news articles, and academic papers that you *can* evaluate and cite.

Troubleshooting Common Pitfalls

Problem	Symptoms	How to Fix It
Terminology mismatch	Your initial searches bring up completely unrelated topics, or zero results.	You are likely using everyday words instead of academic jargon. Return to subject dictionaries or encyclopaedias to find the correct professional terms.
Information overload	The background reading reveals that your topic spans decades of history and multiple disciplines.	Use this information to narrow your research question. Focus on a specific decade, a single design movement, or one specific market.
Getting stuck on visuals	For design students: you have found many images on Pinterest or ArchDaily, but no theoretical context.	Visuals are precedents, not academic background. Take the names of the buildings, designers, or concepts from those images and search for them in library reference books.

Next Steps

Once you understand the context of your topic and have a list of academic keywords, key authors, and precedents, you are ready to construct a formal search strategy.

Continue to: [Develop a Search Strategy and Find Sources](#)