

Finding and Evaluating Viewpoint Articles from Library Databases

Many students may not have yet had a need for finding articles in databases; they may not be familiar with using databases or how the search process differs from web searching. This instructor guide is designed to help you introduce your students to the idea of using databases, how to choose an appropriate database, to construct a fruitful search, and to evaluate their findings. The included exercises and tips serve to reinforce these concepts. This guide is not intended to be a handout for students.

What are databases and why would you use one?

- Databases are collections of information. Many library databases are collections of articles from newspapers, magazines, and academic journals. The Libraries subscribe to these databases on behalf of all students, which means we pay to have access to these collections.
- A Google search will not bring back the information in most library databases unless the publications included in the database have made their content available for free on the web. Databases give you access to large amounts of published information not available for free elsewhere.
- You need to go through the Libraries website and directly into the database to access UT's subscription to that unique collection of information. You can access most of the databases from home, but you'll be prompted for your EID.

Choosing a database to search

A list of the databases that the Libraries provide access to can be found at:

www.lib.utexas.edu > Research Tools > [Find Articles Using Databases](#)

Most databases can be categorized as either Subject-specific or Multidisciplinary

- **Subject** databases collect the literature of a particular academic field. For example, ERIC includes journals articles, research reports and other information from the field of education. To view a list of subject databases, click [Databases by Subject](#) and choose a discipline that might provide information about your controversy. Click "About" next to a database name to learn more about what it contains.
- **Multidisciplinary** databases are collections of articles from newspaper, magazines, and journals that represent a variety of subject areas. Multidisciplinary databases are great places to start your research to learn more about which fields are writing about it. These databases work especially well when you're researching a controversy because individuals from many different subject areas can have a viewpoint on a controversial issue.
- **Shortcuts to Selected Resources** at the bottom of the [Find Articles Using Databases](#) page provides you with the three multidisciplinary databases listed below that are useful starting places for your research.
 - [Academic Search Complete](#): Journal, magazine, and newspaper articles

- [Academic OneFile](#): Journal, magazine, and newspaper articles
- [LexisNexis Academic](#): Local, national, and international newspaper articles

Searching a database for viewpoint articles

Searching library databases does not work the same way as a Google search. When you do a Google search, you can type in almost anything and something will come back.

For example, if you type in “should illegal immigrants be allowed to stay in the US?” you will get 100,000s of hits. However, when you do the same search in a library article database, you will most likely get nothing. Why is that?

Library databases require that you search by concept or key word and connect these using **AND** and **OR**. Before you start your research, you should spend at least a few minutes brainstorming key words that you can use in a database. That way, if your first search doesn't get you what you need, you have other key words on hand to use immediately.

- Academic Search Complete, Academic OneFile, and LexisNexis Academic provide search boxes connected with **AND**. This allows you to represent each concept in a box and link those concepts together. Within each box, use **OR** to include a variety of terms representing a concept.
- Once you've linked your concepts together, each database has its own methods for allowing you to limit a search to editorial and opinion content. Academic Search Complete and Academic OneFile will accept “editorial OR opinion” in addition to your other search terms. Alternately, if you look at some of the available search limits, you can select Editorial or Opinion as a document type. However, LexisNexis includes a more complicated, more robust search interface. View the [LexisNexis Visual Tutorial](#) for tips.
- Each database usually provides a way of emailing results to yourself. Use this strategy to gather the best results of your research in your inbox for future reference. Do not bookmark the URLs of your search results since these will not work later.

Evaluating Viewpoint Articles

Your students will probably have a difficult time distinguishing between informative articles and viewpoint articles. Here are some characteristics to discuss with them that will help them decide if the article they find is a viewpoint article, if it is representative of one side of their controversy, and if it is an informed viewpoint.

- **Author:** Who is the author? A journalist or a researcher reporting facts? Or someone from an organization, a columnist or an expert who is representing a side of the controversy?
 - If there is no information on the author in the article, try searching in Google for more on that person. If the name is common one, use a keyword from the topic (ex. Susan Jones and college athletes)

- **Taking a side:** Does the author present both sides of the controversy or just one? If just one side, is the article advocating that side, or simply reporting about it?
 - Is this author representative of that side? What gives them the authority to represent that side? (ex: is it the chair of the NCAA executive committee? An athlete who wants a salary to play? A sports commentator?)
- **Language:** Does the author use language that indicates one side of a viewpoint? (ex. - anti-immigrant rights = illegals or aliens; pro-immigrant rights = undocumented workers)
- **Section:** What section of the newspaper or magazine does the article come from? Viewpoints don't usually appear in a regular news section. If it is from the opinion/editorial section, or if it is labeled as a 'column' or 'editorial' it is likely to be a viewpoint. Explain to students that op/ed sections contain letters to the editor, too, which can be from anyone, and explain how to identify them.
- **Source bias:** Does the news source generally lean to a particular side of controversies (examples: liberal vs. conservative; free market economics vs. government regulated economy)?
 - For a sample list of liberal and conservative magazines, show the [Find Opinions, Editorials and Opposing Viewpoints](#) page.

The database [Library PressDisplay](#) provides a useful visual representation of newspaper publications, including the division of sections by content. If students are having difficulty distinguishing between viewpoint articles and informative articles, you might consider using Library PressDisplay in the classroom as a way of contrasting content from different sections of the newspaper. This can be particularly useful for students who aren't familiar with the print layout of newspapers and have trouble understanding where to find arguments.

Classroom Exercises and Take-home Assignments

In classroom Exercise: Hands-on Classroom

Explain databases which are likely to contain viewpoint articles and how to get to them from home. Guide them to a recommended list of databases (contact the Libraries to have a research guide created for your course), and talk briefly about what they will find in each database.

- A. After you have discussed the topic, ask your students to complete the worksheet below using their topic. This will give your students the opportunity to find an article that they can use for one of their research summaries.

or

- B. Break students up into groups and have them choose a database and search for articles on a topic. Have each group choose a viewpoint article and evaluate it. Discuss the different databases groups chose, what search terms they used, and the article they chose and how they evaluated it.

In classroom Exercise: Instructor Only Station

Explain databases which are likely to contain viewpoint articles and how to get to them from home. Guide them to a recommended list of databases (contact the Libraries to have a research guide created for your course), and talk briefly about what they will find in each.

- A. Choose a database and do a search for a sample topic. Have students guide you through the process of choosing and evaluating an article that is likely to be a viewpoint (you might choose a representative example in advance). If you have time, find two articles that are different, for instance one that is obvious and one that is more difficult to evaluate.

In classroom Exercise: No Technology in the Classroom

Ask your students to complete the worksheet below before coming to class. Since you don't teach in a hands-on classroom, this is an assignment that will get your students to search for viewpoint articles and evaluate the ones that they choose.

- A. In-class discussion: After your students have found an article on their own, discuss what kinds of articles they found and what steps they took to determine that they were viewpoint articles, and that these viewpoints were representative and informed.

or

- B. Print a viewpoint article in advance and give copies to your students. Have them form groups and analyze/evaluate the article and pick out clues as to why it is a viewpoint (since they can't go online, these should be from within the article - section of the newspaper, a line about who the author is, language the author uses, etc.) and whether it is informed and representative.

Finding and Evaluating Viewpoint Articles from Library Databases - Worksheet

Step 1: Search for an article

Select a database and search for viewpoint articles on your topic.

A. Which database did you search?

B. Write down the search terms you used.

C. How many results did you get?

D. If you had to revise your search, how did you revise it? How did that change your search results?

Step 2: Find the full text of an article and cite it

A. If the full text is not there, locate it. How did you find it?

- B. Write down the citation.

Step 3: Evaluate the article

- A. Does the author have the expertise to provide an informed viewpoint? How did you determine this? (TIP! If necessary, Google the author to find out more information about him/her).

- B. Is the author's viewpoint representative? How did you determine this?

- C. What factors convinced you that this is a viewpoint article?