How to… find existing research

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CENTRE FOR CULTURAL VALUE

Have you found you can't access potentially useful research because it's behind a paywall? Or that reading the abstract or description of articles doesn't always help you understand whether the research is relevant?

If the answer is yes to any of these questions, this 'How to…' guide can help. Here we'll talk you through how to identify and access research relevant to your project.

Why is it important to understand what research is already out there?

Reviewing literature is a common exercise undertaken by researchers, and an important part of building knowledge in a given field. Looking at the research literature that is already out there can help you or your organisation build a picture of the area you are interested in, and foster opportunities to develop new and exciting research.

By exploring what has come before, you can avoid doing unnecessary research. You can also build stronger justification for the novelty of your proposed research (i.e. I'm the first to do this), or showcase areas that need further research to strengthen the evidence base (i.e. I can address this gap in research). It can also help to scope who is working within the field. This can open up opportunities for discussion and even research collaborations.

Before you search…

The first thing to note is the expansive nature of literature. There is so much out there, from academic sources to consultancy reports, that it can be difficult to wade through without some guidance.

Here are a few steps to walk through before you scope out the literature.

1. Develop some questions you want to find answers to

When approaching the literature, you want to have some questions in mind that you are looking for the answers to. This will help you find the most relevant research and help you avoid going down a literature rabbit hole. You might find our How to Guide on developing research questions a helpful place to start.

Here's an example. In the context of my PhD research, I was interested in reviewing the literature surrounding the uses of music for people living with dementia. There were already reviews that focussed on behavioural and psychological 'symptoms' of dementia but none that had considered what was meaningful to people living with dementia themselves. So, the question I developed to explore the literature was:

What are the experiences of people living with dementia when they take part in music-related activities?

The experiences part of my question narrows the focus to qualitative literature because quantitative literature is not able to illuminate personal experiences as easily. My population is people living with dementia and I was specifically interested in music-related activities.

2. Develop key words that are specific to your topic area

Now that you've landed on your question, you can start to develop key words that will help you to identify literature that falls within the area you're interested in. You need to make sure that you break down key words that are too broad (i.e., arts) to something more specific (i.e., visual art). Here's an example of how I broke the key words down in my review.

Focus	Key words
People living with dementia	Dementia; Alzheimer's
Music	Music; musicking; music therapy; singing; preferred listening
Qualitative methods	Qualitative; mixed methods; interview; focus group; observation

Then use combinations of your search terms to input into search engines, databases and journal search bars, for example. And of course, if you have a link to a library this is often the best place to start.

Where to look…

Now you have your questions and key words, it's time to do some searching. There's a number of ways to search for literature. Here we talk you through some of the key routes.

Research repositories

The table below provide some examples of online repositories which can be searched to identify both peer reviewed and non-academic literature. It is by no means extensive and you may come across others

Examples of research repositories

University repositories	Sector repositories	Topic specific repositories
White Rose Research Online	Arts Council England's Research Library	Repository for Arts and Health Resources
University of Liverpool Repository	National Museums Scotland Research Repository	
Queen Margaret University Repository	Shared Research Repository for Cultural and Heritage Organisations	
The University of Sheffield's Research Repository		

Most universities will have their own research repository which gives access to preprints or open access articles. University repositories are also a great place to find student dissertations or theses which may not have been written up into publications yet.

There are also topic specific repositories, which bring together academic and non-academic literature within a central database. For example, I used the Repository for Arts and Health Resources to identify literature in our Culture, health and wellbeing theme is

You can also search for research through Arts Council England's research and data pages, as well as the Shared Research Repository for Cultural and Heritage Organisations.

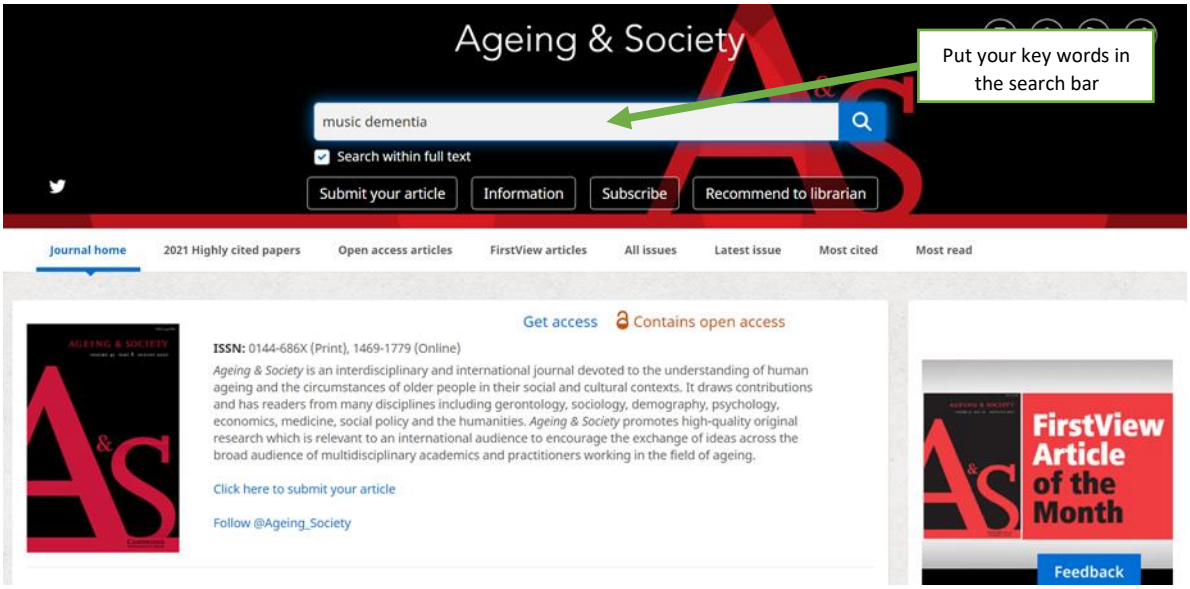
Open access articles

Within each academic journal's website there will be a search function where you can search by key words for articles. You can refine the search by 'Only show open access' which will only show studies that are fully accessible for free.

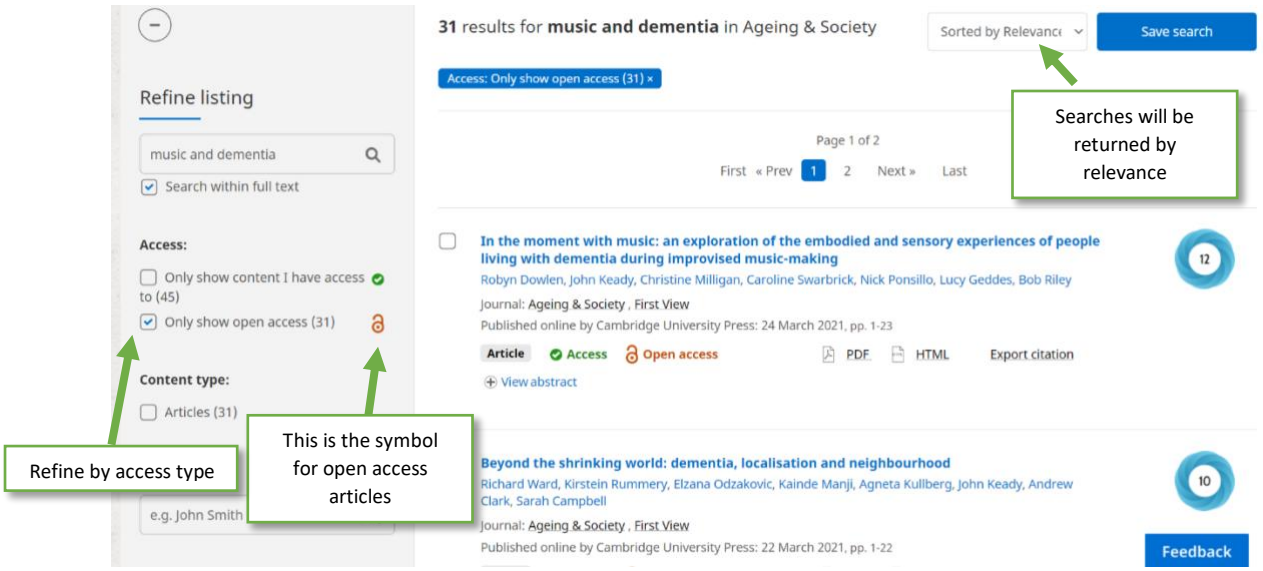
For example, if you were interested in the value of music programmes for people living with dementia and searched for open access articles using Ageing & Society, your search would return papers most relevant to your key words. In this case it is my PhD research findings paper.

Please see image on following page.

Step one: Search using key words



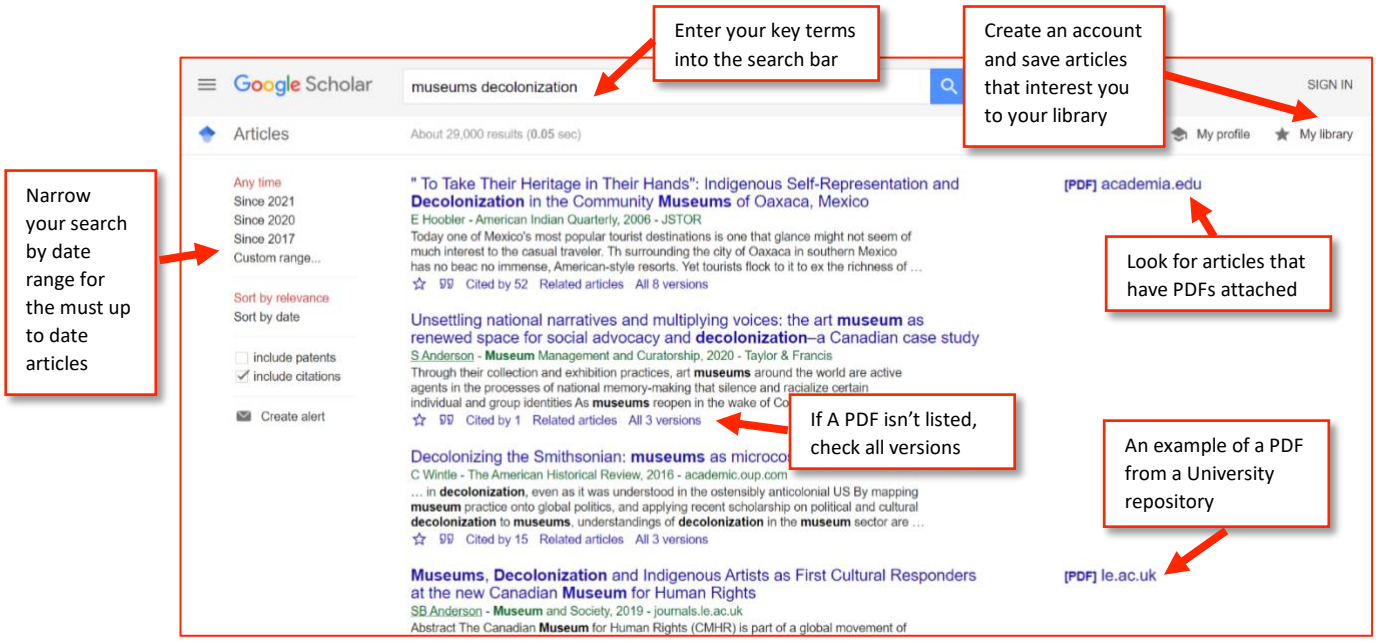
Step two: Refine by open access



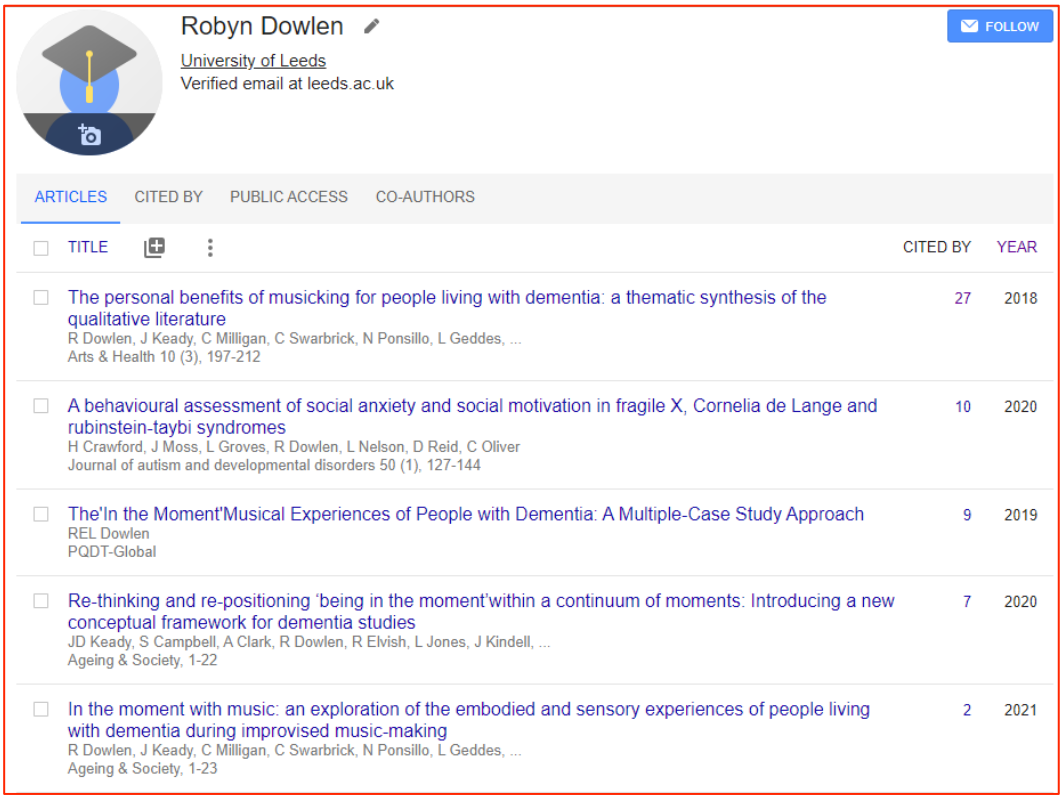
Google Scholar

Google Scholar is a database that can be used to search for academic literature. While not everything will be open access, it is a useful place to identify preprints and open access sources. Many universities expect preprints to be uploaded by researchers to be able to ensure research is not held behind a paywall. Many of the PDFs you find will be uploaded to university repositories and linked to Google Scholar search results. Here is an example of how to find preprints using Google Scholar.

Helpful tip: You may not be able to see an article listed with an accompanying PDF, but it is always worth clicking on the 'All versions' button beneath articles as there may be an alternative access route.



Google Scholar is also useful if you want to find out about the publications of a specific researcher. Academics can create profiles which collate all their research into one place. Here's my profile as an example. If you click the 'Public Access' tab, it will take you through to all the open access resources by that author.



Bibliographies and reference lists

Each research publication (should) have a list of sources at the end of it. This will list any citations that have been used to support the rationale of the study, as well as supporting the justification of methods etc. This is a great place to find any literature related to the research you have found. Useful citations tend to be within the introduction or literature review of an article.

Explore the Centre for Cultural Value's resources

The Centre for Cultural Value reviews and summarises existing research to make it more easily accessible so its insights can be understood and applied more widely. We have published a number of research digests which outline what the evidence is for different topic areas and where future research has focussed. Digests are published every few months.

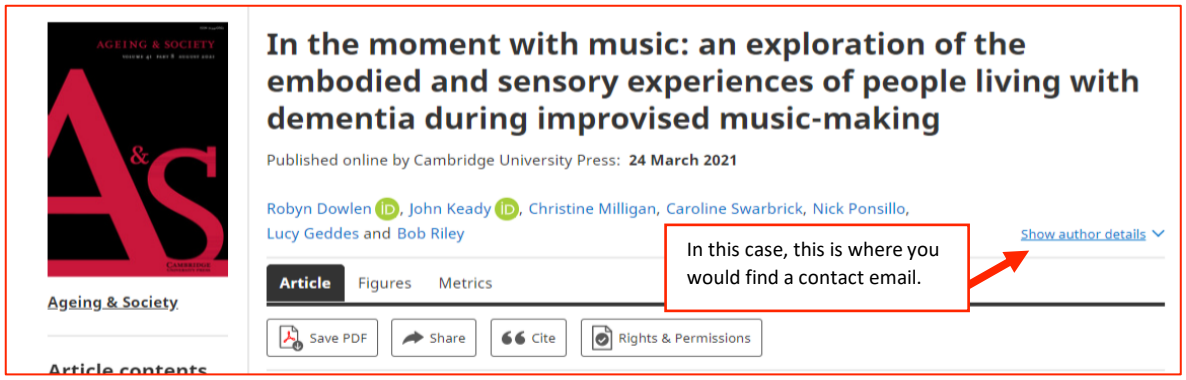
We also have case studies and podcast episodes which discuss approaches to evaluation and research, as well as unpicking what future research can build upon.

You may also want to explore CultureCase, which also has accessible research summaries that support arts and cultural activities.

Contact the authors

If open access searching still doesn't return the literature you are most interested in, you can contact the authors of publications directly to see if they would be happy to share the publication with you – and this might offer up an opportunity to have a conversation with them about their work. It is always worth asking as most researchers are only too happy to be contacted. I always respond to requests, it might just take me a little while to answer.

Every journal article, whether open access or not, has a corresponding author with an email address listed. So, in the case of one of my publications (see below), click 'show author details' to display an email address. In some journals you can hover over author names for the email address to be displayed. Most research repositories will also list contact details of research authors.



Glossary

Paywall – where access is restricted to users without library subscriptions. Typically you can pay for access to the articles.

Peer-reviewed – the process of scrutiny of an author's work by experts before academic journal articles are accepted for publication.

Preprints – an author's manuscript that is published ahead of the peer-review process; or the author's own version of the text which has been accepted for publication but not yet published.

About the author

Robyn is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the Centre for Cultural Value where she synthesises and summarises relevant research and helps make it as accessible as possible to the cultural sector. Robyn completed her PhD in 2019 which examined 'in the moment' benefits of music-making for people living with dementia.

Have you undertaken a similar project?
What did you learn?

Share your reflections and learning with us at ccv@leeds.ac.uk and we'll feed this into future versions of this 'How to…' guide.

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