Databases – What? Why!?

Video Transcript

The library website lists a bunch of different research databases but what are they exactly and why should you even bother using them? We know databases can be frustrating sometimes but this short video will answer these and a couple other questions you may have asked yourself while doing research.

First off, library databases are subscription-based, searchable collections of articles and other information usually focused on a specific subject or range of subjects. Some are even super specialized, like the Historical New York Times or Hoover's, which contains company and industry information. There has to be a reason why universities keep spending money on this stuff even though searching Google seems a whole lot easier. There is!

Even though it might not feel like it, sometimes you get to better resources faster by using the library. Library databases contain high quality online information that is not available anywhere else. Google only searches a portion of the massive amount of information on the web. Many things in the library are literally below the surface, just like the rest of this iceberg. This is called the deep or invisible web.

That said, you may have wondered why the library does not at least just have one search box like Google. Well, it’s complicated. Library resources are part of an ecosystem of vendors and publishers. Indexing makes everything searchable and it is not uniform across the board. Google's indexing is done by fancy web spiders and highly paid programmers but it’s much more decentralized for libraries.

Along the same lines, you may have also wondered why there are so many different looks among the various databases. This is because each vendor has their own aesthetic. For example, we have over a dozen EBSCO databases so those are all nearly identical but there’s only one JSTOR. Libraries are in the knowledge business and want to provide you with the best, deepest information possible. This means databases from a variety of vendors but you’ll learn they all work really similarly.

One of the most frequent questions we get is about full-text. Why isn’t everything available in full-text? Well, publishers are invited to the party too. Publishers work directly with vendors and negotiate levels of access to their content. This might mean their articles are searchable and available to read online through library databases or only searchable. The library also supplements database content with individual journal subscriptions for important titles.

Students sometimes get frustrated when there is no full text but database research is about access and digging deep. They help you search the rest of the iceberg. Searching the most information possible is essential when you’re trying to find the most comprehensive body of knowledge on a topic. To fully flex the library’s resources, remember to click 360 check for full text when there isn’t any in the database you are using and this will check our other subscriptions.

If we don’t have access, there’s always interlibrary loan and when you’re in a time crunch most databases have an option to limit your results to only those available in full text. From here, you’ll be well served by getting to know the best databases for your major or program. If you're not sure what those might be or are struggling to find appropriate resources, contact the library’s reference staff. We’d be more than happy to help. Thanks for watching!