

Oakland University Library Tutorials

HST 3010

Finding and evaluating secondary sources

Hello, my name is Dominique. I am the librarian for history at Kresge Library and I'm here to help you with your assignments and research.

Today I would like to give you a few tips on how to search and find secondary sources in history, using Library OneSearch. You will find additional resources in the library guide for this class, which is located on the library website.

OneSearch is the library's search tool to find anything in our collections, both physical and online. It's easy to search, but I would like to suggest ways to make the search fast and effective. We have a lot of resources, and it's not always easy to identify the most useful ones, or the most reliable ones.

A. Finding secondary sources using Library OneSearch

Let's start with a simple search. For example, I'm going to search for books about Hernan Cortes. I simply type in his name and search. This gives us many results, and a quick look at the titles shows that many are not relevant. That's because the name Cortes is pretty common, and is not just about the Spanish conquistador.

To improve the search, you can:

1) put his name in quotation marks.

This forces the system searches for the 2 words together, rather than just Cortes and Hernan separately.

You can see that it improves the search, as all results are about the conquistador. But there are still too many results of different types (books, but also reference entries, etc.)

2) Once I have these results, I can use the facets on the left side.

– especially, I can limit to books (and eliminate all other content),
-- and I can use dates to refine your search. For example, I can search for books since 1980.

This reduces the number of results. Now, if I don't like what I see, I can change the facets. For example, I can search for books from 2000 on or remove that date limitation altogether.

It's still not a perfect search. Not all the results will be useful, and I will have to examine them to identify good quality sources that meet my research need. But it's easier to go through this limited list to select useful ones.

In short, try to use quotation marks (to keep words together) + facets (books, date).

I did this for a simple search, but these tips work for more complex searches too. For example, let's say I want to search for books on the conversion of indigenous people to Christianity under Spanish rule. For this, I will have to **think a bit more about the terms I want to use.**

- Should I use indigenous or native people?
- Should I use Mesoamerica or some other geographic terms? “New Spain” (in quotation marks, to keep the 2 words together and avoid results about Spain)?
- Should I use Christianity, or Christian faith, religion?
- Should I include the word conversion?

All of these are valid options, and the best way to answer these questions is to try all these terms, and more.

For example, let's search for Mesoamerica Christianity. You **do not need** any other words such as “Christianity in Mesoamerica” or “the situation of the Christian faith in Mesoamerica”.

To do this search, I would like to **keep the filter I selected earlier** – so I can simply click on “remember all filters” and my new search will be limited to books.

In these results, the titles do not include my search terms but they seem to be relevant. I can add the term indigenous to narrow it down more, or the word conversion, or both. This might give me some of the same results, but also some new ones I hadn't seen before.

In short, it is important to try different search terms (synonyms, or variants).

Searching is not just a one-time process but more like trial and error.

There might be some search terms combinations that do not give good results, and others that do.

Even for a search on Hernan Cortes, I should try different versions of his name – Hernando, Fernando, Cortes / z.

B. Evaluating results

Once we've conducted some keyword searches that are effective and give some results that have promising titles, it is time to look more closely at the results and to evaluate them. From the results page, we can see a little bit of information about the item, but it's worth clicking on it to see more.

For example let's look at the description of *Frontiers of Evangelization*. I can see who is the author, the date of publication, and if I scroll down, a short summary and the publisher. This is important, because a book **published by a university press** is more likely to be of good quality. It's also worth checking if the **author** is a historian and if they have published on the subject before.

Sometimes, the titles are not very useful by themselves. For this book entitled *Holy Saints*, for example, I would like to check what it is about. I can see the table of contents in the record. This book includes chapters by different people on different topics, some of which may be useful.

You'll notice that **some books are available in print** (they are on the third floor of Kresge Library) and **others are online**.

The books in print can be picked up directly, or you can request that they be pulled for you and shipped.

The online books can be accessed from anywhere, provided you log in, using your Oakland netID and password. Just use the link provided in Library OneSearch.

Looking inside the book will also help us evaluate the quality and usefulness of the book. For example, I can quickly scan the introduction to *Frontiers of Evangelization* to see what the book is about. In general, authors use the introduction, or the first pages of the book, to lay out the topics they want to discuss, the questions they want to raise, the thesis they will develop, and how their research adds to existing scholarship, or challenges existing scholarship.

In short, you do not need to read the entire book to evaluate it. Examine the record in Library OneSearch, and if it's promising and the book is online, check out the table of contents and introduction.

To summarize, here are some tips:

- Put phrases of 2 words or more between quotation marks
- Use the facets to try different filters
- Try different combinations of keywords, and synonyms or variants of keywords
- Search is iterative – it's important to try several strategies
- Check out the author, date, publisher, and abstract or table of contents
- Review the introduction to the book

I encourage you to explore the library guide for this course, which contains a list of resources – both secondary and primary sources. In addition, feel free to contact me directly if you have any problem or question. My contact information is on the guide and on the library website.

For more information

HST 3010 library guide

<https://research.library.oakland.edu/sp/subjects/guide.php?subject=HST3010sh>

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