

HOW TO GUIDE #6

BEGIN RESEARCHING YOUR ASSIGNMENT



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How to:

Begin Researching Your Assignment

Beginning the research for a law assignment can be extremely daunting, particularly for new law students. This Guide provides recommendations for beginning your research, locating useful sources, and developing a good understanding of your assignment topic.

Understand your question and topic

To avoid becoming overwhelmed, it is necessary that you first understand the question and build a base understanding of your topic before undertaking your substantive research. This reduces your stress levels, allows for more strategic, targeted searches, and increases the likelihood that you will identify relevant sources when you come across them. You can build your understanding by reading the appropriate section/s of your textbook, listening to lecture/s that deal with the topic, and by conducting searches of online Legal Encyclopaedias such as *Halsbury's Laws of Australia* or *The Laws of Australia*. You should consider consulting a second textbook if you are confused after reading your set textbook.

Make sure that if you decide to use Google in this initial research stage that you Google strategically –check that the webpages that come up are Australian and that the material is current. Also, trust the accuracy of solicitor briefs and government materials over sources like Wikipedia.

Go to the library

It might seem a bit antiquated, but going to the library can be an extremely good way to get your head around your research topic. Books are an excellent way to develop a base level of understanding of a topic, key precedents, and controversies.

Locating edited collections at the library that are on point can also be a helpful way to begin researching your assignment. Edited volumes help you identify key authors in a particular field, from which you can conduct further author searches on the library catalogue or on legal databases.

Another benefit of conducting your initial research at the library is that if you identify one source, you can easily find further relevant sources because books on similar topics are grouped together on the shelves.

Also, if you are struggling to construct sufficiently narrow or wide database searches, most universities allow you to make an appointment with a librarian who can help you with your research. This can be extremely helpful, particularly if you are finding it difficult to find good comparative research.

Check to see if your topic co-ordinator has written on the topic

Many topic co-ordinators set assignment questions according to their research interests. Look up your topic co-ordinators staff page on the law school website, and read their publication list. If they have written on the assignment topic, make sure that you locate the publication and use it in your essay. However, where possible, avoid criticising their arguments!

Try different search techniques

Do not simply type the assignment question as a search string into a database. Try different combinations of key words and synonyms, use Boolean search terms such as 'and' 'or' or 'not' to increase the relevance of your results, and conduct legislation and case citator searches. Once you find a relevant article, click on its details so that you can see which subject key words it is listed under. Click on the subject hyperlinks to try and locate further materials. Also consider searching by author once you have identified key authors in the field.

Don't forget parliamentary websites

Remember that legal sources are not only found in textbooks. Consider searching government websites for parliamentary materials like second reading speeches and explanatory memoranda. These sources provide information about a law's purpose, intended operation and scope.

Look outside of law

Consider searching humanities databases to see if there is any overlap between your assignment question and other disciplines such as criminology, psychology, and sociology.

Using a newspaper database such as Factiva can also be helpful in locating relevant materials, particularly if your assignment question is on a controversial area of law.

Conducting newspaper searches can give you a general understanding of key

issues, provide evidence of public opinion, and help you identify experts in a particular field. However, remember that newspaper articles are not a substitute for academic research.

Follow the footnote trail

Once you locate one relevant article, you can use its footnotes as the inspiration for your next search. Look up the footnotes in your library catalogue, or see if the article is available online through Google Scholar. Also, Google the staff pages of the cited academics and see if they have written any recent articles on topic. Data-mining a key article's footnotes can occur in conjunction with other search methods, and help you cover the field and make sure you do not miss any vital sources. However, never cite an article based on someone else's reference – read the article yourself to determine its relevancy.



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