



Database Searching: The whys and hows

An ability to search databases has become an essential skill. If you can do e-mail and surf the web, you can also learn how to search databases.

Half-life of knowledge is less than 8 years

As a consequence, half of today's knowledge will be out-of-date in less than a decade. Also, half of what one will need to know 8 years from now is not now available. Thus, the ability to access information becomes critical.

Increasingly, it is a truism that it's not what you know, but what you are able to find out that is the critical factor.

Demise of card catalogs

A substantial number of library systems have retired and physically removed their card catalogs. Library patrons now have to use the library's computer-based online system to find materials.

Nature of substance abuse literature

The substance abuse field is distinct in many ways. It contrasts sharply with other more established biomedical or human service fields. For one, the literature is very dispersed. This means there are not a handful of journals which if browsed regularly will assure your being up-to-date. There are several reasons for this. One important one is that the substance abuse field is relatively new. An important characteristic of the literature of 'newer' fields of inquiry is that it is dispersed over many journals. Over time, inevitably some of these journals disappear or consolidate. In the substance abuse field this "shake-down," which will result in a limited number of journals surviving over the long haul, has not yet occurred.

In addition, the field is one which crosses many disciplines. Therefore, the relevant literature is found in the journals of the basic biomedical sciences, the medical clinical sciences, the social sciences (including sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics, and history), as well as law journals, applied journals such as those devoted to evaluation studies, as well as the specialty substance abuse journals. Even if one faithfully keeps up with journals in any one field, when it comes to substance abuse, it inevitably means missing those things that are published in other literatures.

One way of appreciating this fact is to examine the sources of journal articles in the CORK bibliographic database of substance abuse information. Of approximately 52,000 items (covering a period from the late 1970s to the present), 48,500 represent the journal literature. These articles are drawn from over 1,450 different journals. The single most frequently occurring journal represents less than 6% of the database's journal article entries.

The substance abuse field is also unique in that it has a large proportion of what librarians term "fugitive literature." This includes foundation and government reports — the types of materials that are not indexed in the standard databases, which typically are restricted to journal literature.