



U. S. History Research

Teach Yourself To Use The Catalog—For Students



Library Catalog as the key to the collection

- Keyword Searching
- Alphabetical Searching
- The Finer Points of using the catalog
- Primary Sources

The catalog is the key to the library's holdings. All the public access computers in the building have access to the catalog.

These are a few pointers on how to search. If you have ANY questions or have any problems, ask for assistance at the Reference Desk. What follows are basic concepts of catalog searching along with brief explanations. This cannot be simplified more. You HAVE to read and understand these concepts.

The catalog is just a catalog. You still have to take the call numbers and go to the shelves to retrieve the material.

The catalog is designed to search for keywords, NOT long phrases or sentences. Putting too many words into one search may narrow your results to a few useless (for your purposes) items.

If one combination of key words does not work, adding additional words to the same combination will not yield better results. *For example:* If you search "reconstruction in the south" and get negative results, re-doing the search as "reconstruction in the south after the civil war" will also get negative results. However, simply searching "reconstruction" will bring positive results. ***Sometimes less is more when doing keyword searching.***

You have to spell correctly. If you are not sure of a spelling you can **truncate your search**. Put as much of the word as you can spell correctly and then add an asterisk (*). This will tell the computer to search for all words with variations of the word you entered.

For example:

Using the search "Civil War Battle*" will find material on battles, battlefields, battleground, battleships, etc.

Reference material is not always easily accessible through the computer catalog. The catalog is NOT a full-text search engine as you use on the internet. It does not search for words or concepts inside a reference book on a broad category such as United States History. The collection guide provides a key to the reference collection. **DO NOT IGNORE reference books.** Some of the best material for your assignment will be found in reference books.

Sometimes you have to look at books on a broader topic. *For example:* If your assignment is to write about one particular battle in a war and you don't find individual books on your battle, look for books about the war. Then check the index in each book to find information about the individual battle.

On-line catalogs use a controlled vocabulary. You have to use words that are in the catalog's index. These are not always terms as you would use them in conversation. If you have trouble finding what you need, ask the Reference Librarian for assistance. Chances are you don't have the same vocabulary as a reference librarian who works with the catalog every day. Ask for help. **DO NOT ASSUME** the library cannot meet your needs.

Learn to think in alternate terms. If one word doesn't work, try a similar term or opposite term. For example: Slavery, Slaves, Antislavery, and Abolitionists are all terms that will work in the catalog. All will yield material about slavery.

GETTING STARTED

There are several types of searching.

- Keyword search
- Alphabetical search
- Numerical search

Each has its purposes and uses. When researching United States History you will probably use keyword and/or alphabetical or some combination of the two.

Using KEYWORD SEARCH

You don't need to have words in the correct order to find results. Only items that have your keywords somewhere in their description appear as a result. For example: "civil war history" will search exactly the same as "history civil war". This works for names, too. "Bruce Catton" searches the same as "Catton Bruce".

The General Keyword (all fields) search is the broadest search. This search looks at authors, titles, subjects, series titles, descriptions and summaries. Sometimes you can get too many results. This is the quickest type of search if you don't know where else to begin.

Refine your search. Once you get a few items that look useful, look at the detailed listing. This will tell you what terms the library used to describe this item. You can click on the subject headings and find other items that use the same subject in the catalog.

For example:

- If you search as general keywords “thirteen colonies” you will get a list of 26 items.
- Scroll through the list of titles and there will be a book specifically titled *The Story of the Thirteen Colonies*.
- Click on that title to see the complete listing including the subject headings.
- Notice the subject heading: “United States—History—Colonial period, ca. 1600-1775”. This is the official subject heading for titles about the colonies.
- Click on this subject heading you will see a list of all the subject headings similar to this one.

The subject headings are listed 10 at a time. You can move forward or backward through the list, 10 at a time. This can be very useful to see what other subject headings are used. Along the right side is a number showing how many items the library has with that subject heading. Click on any of the headings and you will see a list of the titles.

Using ALPHABETICAL SEARCHING

Alphabetical Searching or Browse Searching allows you to search individual indexes. In the previous example, clicking on a subject heading took you from a keyword search to an alphabetical search of the subject index.

Alphabetical searching is very specific. If you do not use words in the same order as they are used in the catalog, the search will not work. For example, if you were searching for the specific author alphabetically, you would have to use “Catton, Bruce”. Last name, followed by first name. If you use Bruce Catton, you will not get any books by him.

See an example of alphabetical searching:

- Click on the tab for “**alphabetical search**”
- Under “**Subject browse**” type United States History
- Press Enter

What you see are all the subject headings used by the library that begin with the words "United States History". As you will see, there are hundreds of finer point subdivisions. You can scroll forward or backward through the index, 10 subject headings at a time.

Scroll through the list and you can see the type of vocabulary used in the catalog. It can be helpful to scroll through the list to get ideas for related subject headings. Using this technique in combination with looking at full records from a keyword search can broaden your search strategies.

REMEMBER this is a strictly alphabetical search. It is NOT chronological, although it may seem that way. There will be a series of headings with date ranges in them. These are chronological. AFTER all these listings are additional headings in alphabetical order. Keep in mind, alphabetically, Civil War comes before Colonial Period. This is exactly why alphabetical searching alone can be difficult.

❖ **More tricks when using the catalog**

When you get a list of search results they will be in random order. There are several ways to sort your results. On the right hand side of the screen is a pull-down menu with sorting options:

- By author
- By title
- By publication date
- By media format

Usually, the most useful sort is by publication date. This will display the list in descending date order (the newest items in the catalog will be listed first).

Depending on what you are trying to accomplish you may find the other options useful.

❖ **Even more advanced techniques**

You can also limit your search results to certain parts of the collection. This is really for advanced users and will possibly narrow your results too much for a basic school assignment. You are welcome to try it, but you may want to stick with just sorting your results.

❖ Using the “MYLIST” feature to print your list

Once you are searching and finding titles you want to look at, you can start building a list to print.

Under each title is a box “add to my list”. Clicking on that box adds that title to a list you can build as you search. As long as you do not log off you can continue to add to your list. This is a temporary list that lasts only for your session at the computer.

Up at the top of the screen is a “My list” icon that shows how many titles you have added. When you are done adding titles, you can view the list by clicking on “My list”.

The list will display in an easy-to-read format suitable for printing. If there is no call number displayed in the box next to the title, the item is checked out. For ease of use you can click at the top of the column of the call numbers and your list will be sorted in call number order. When you print the list it makes it easy to check the shelves with the list in order.

SPECIAL NOTE ABOUT PRIMARY SOURCES

There are many reference books that are primary sources, but there are many books in the general collection that include source documents.

These keywords are especially useful for turning up primary source material. Primary sources might also be in other books on a given topic. These subject headings are used when a significant portion of the book is source documents.

- sources
- personal narratives
- correspondence
- documents
- diaries

For example: If you are looking for source documents related to the Civil War, try keyword searching “Civil War Personal Narratives” (without the quotation marks). You should find a list of items that include personal writings by people involved in the Civil War. Try searching “Civil War correspondence”. You should find books that are collections of letters by people during the Civil War.

Some final reminders

Lansing Library has a solid collection for U.S. History students. If you aren't finding what you need, ASK THE REFERENCE LIBRARIAN for assistance. Doing research and using the various resources of the library is a learning experience. Don't be afraid to ask for assistance. Many of the questions you have and topics you are researching are not quick, short-answer questions. It may even take some digging by the reference staff to find useful material for you.

Be persistent. Pay attention to how the librarian finds material and try applying those techniques for your next reference need.

ALWAYS ask for help. Don't assume and don't just walk away empty-handed.