Introduction
Imagine you’ve been assigned a research paper on the life of a writer you’ve never heard of. What are the first steps you take to find sources? Do you start with Google? If you can’t find what you’re looking for right away, what do you do next? And how do you wade through thousands of search results to find the ones you really want?

In this lesson, we’ll talk about beginning your research using library databases. A database is an electronic catalog that gives you information about how to find publications like books or articles. The information about each individual publication is called a citation. You can use this information to locate the publication in your library or online. Sometimes the full text of the publication will be available with the citation.

Most databases focus on specific topics, such as genealogy or art history, so no single database will contain information about all existing publications. Once you find the database you want, you can search to find publications that are even more closely related to your topic.

In this lesson, you will learn how to find out what resources are available, how to decide on the best places to search, and how to make sure you have access to the tools you need.

Subject Guides
Your first step is to see what’s available to you. Take a look at your library’s website. Most libraries provide a list of the databases available to their users. On your library’s website, look for a “subject guide,” or a listing of databases sorted by subject. You may need a username and password to access this portion of your library’s website, so talk to your librarian if you run into any problems.

Let’s get started by looking for sources for an academic article on the life of the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. We’ll use the Library of Congress’s website for this search.
Think about your topic: What field or fields does it fall within? No database has everything, so look for a collection whose focus is likely to include your topic. You’re looking for information about a poet, so it makes sense to look for sources that focus on poetry or writing. Under the Arts and Humanities heading, you’ll see a link to the Language and Literature section. This is a good place to start your search because you already know these sources are likely to be relevant to your topic.

In some cases, it can also be helpful to narrow down your sources by type. For example, since you’re looking for broad, general information about Anna Akhmatova’s life, a biography would be a good starting place. If you were trying to find critical reviews of her work, however, you might want to narrow your search to focus on book reviews or essays of literary criticism.

Predict
Your next step is to look at the specific tools available and predict which ones are most likely to contain the information you want. Some libraries allow you to do a single search that searches multiple databases, but many libraries do not—in which case you will need to search each database individually. Either way, your time is important. Limiting your search to the most relevant tools for your topic will give you a better-focused set of results to choose from.

Here’s the list of the library’s Language and Literature resources. Even within this subtopic, there are nearly 100 resources! However, as you look through the descriptions, it’s clear that many of these will not be useful sources for your topic. You are looking for biographical information on a Russian poet, so it’s not likely that “African Writers Series” or the “Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature” will have much for you—these databases focus on writers from other locations.

Some of the more general sources look like they could be of use for your search. With over a half-million biographies, “Biography in Context” seems like a useful place to look for the information you’re seeking. So does “Columbia Granger’s World of Poetry,” which includes biographies. You may also be able to use the “Dictionary of Literary Biography.”

There are also a few more specific tools that might be promising for this topic. Look at the “Fundamental Digital Library of Russian Literature and Folklore” and the “Russian Virtual Library.” These databases focus only on Russian literature, so they would be likely to contain some of the information you’re looking for.

Rank
Now that you’ve selected a few places to start searching, take a moment to rank them in order of their usefulness for your specific topic and needs. If you start with the best database for this particular search, you might just find what you need, and never need to look through the other databases you selected.
From the set of nearly 100 Language and Literature databases, you found five that looked like they might be useful:

» Biography in Context

» Columbia Granger’s World of Poetry

» Dictionary of Literary Biography

» Fundamental Digital Library of Russian Literature and Folklore

» Russian Virtual Library

In most cases, it makes sense to start with the resources that are most closely related to your topic. So ranking these databases in order, you have:

1. **Fundamental Digital Library of Russian Literature** and **Folklore and Russian Virtual Library**: These sources are both specific to Russian literature and are the likeliest places to find good information about a Russian poet.

2. **Columbia Granger’s World of Poetry** and **Dictionary of Literary Biography**: These two sources are one notch up from a general biography database. Columbia Granger is specific to poetry and contains biographies, and the Dictionary of Literary Biography is made up entirely of biographies of writers.

3. **Biography in Context**: This is a general database of biographies that doesn’t focus specifically on Russia or literature, so you should save it for last.

**Knowledge**

After you’ve found the best resources for your search and ranked them in order, it’s time to think about the practicalities of starting your research.

First, make sure you have knowledge you need to use a given resource. You can do this by reviewing the descriptions of your selected databases to make sure they’re appropriate for your research. For example, let’s take a look again at the Russian Virtual Library, one of the top-ranked choices from the last step.

What does this description tell you? It’s free and intended for a variety of different types of users; that’s all good information. But then you get to the last sentence and discover that it’s in Russian. Unless you’re fortunate enough to be fluent, you don’t have the necessary knowledge for this to be a useful resource.

**Access**

It’s also important to be sure that you can actually get access to the resources you’ve decided on. In some cases, a single username and password will get you access to your library’s subject guides and all library supported databases. In other cases, you
may need different login information for different resources. It’s a good idea to talk to your librarian about how best to access your library’s resources from both in and outside of the library building, as there are different procedures.

Some resources are freely accessible from anywhere, with no login required. Some are accessible from outside the library, or “remotely,” but you need a username and password to use them. And some resources may only be accessed from a computer on the library network, or “on-site,” meaning that you’ll need to make a trip to the library to use them. This isn’t a bad thing, and the information you find will often make the trip worthwhile. But knowing this will help you plan how much time and energy each part of your research might take.

You should also look at the kind of content the database offers. Some databases provide the full text of every single article that appears as a search result. Other databases do not provide any actual articles, just the citations themselves along with abstracts or summaries, which can be helpful in deciding if the article has the information you need. For these types of databases, you’ll need to talk to your librarian about how to access the articles you find. Many databases provide a mix of full-text articles, abstracts, and citations. Know what your database offers so that you can plan your research accordingly.

Ask a Librarian
You can always contact your librarian with questions about how to access the library’s resources, whether it’s finding the full text of a specific article or figuring out what database to start your search with. Their main job is to help connect you with the information you’re looking for. Many libraries offer reference assistance by email and live chat. Some are even available 24 hours a day. It’s easier than ever to get in touch with an expert who can make your research process shorter and smoother.

Next Steps

» You will complete a few practice activities related to what you’ve just learned.

» Then, it’s on to Lesson 2, Smart Searching Methods.

» At the end of Module 1, you’ll take an assessment.