Conducting a SoTL Literature Search

Once you identify your topic and preliminary research question(s), your next step is to explore the literature related to your research question(s). A literature search will help you understand how your study fits into what is already known about this topic and help you refine your research questions. This worksheet will help you begin to systematically explore the literature.

Step 1: Identify

1a. Identify 3-5 Relevant Journals

Begin by identifying 3-5 journals that may be relevant to your SoTL project. List them below. You may find this Teaching Journal Directory helpful! Navigate to "Topics in Higher Education, N-Z" and then select "Pedagogical Research - General" and "Pedagogical Research - Specific."

General SoTL Journals:

-
-

Disciplinary Journals:

-
-

1b. Identify Relevant Databases

Next, determine the relevant databases available to you. These will depend on your institution. To see what is available to you at the University of Virginia, see the Subject Guides. For SoTL-relevant databases, you will select "Education and Human Development," followed by "Education (K-12 and Higher Ed)." There may also be other subjects of interest to you; you are welcome to explore other possibilities as well.

Through this process, you will find a host of relevant databases, including but not limited to:

- ERIC (EBSCO) - the #1 database for education research in the U.S.
- Google Scholar - broad and easy to use
- APA PsycINFO - best for psychology, learning, and child development topics
- LearnTechLib (formerly EdITLib) - focused on educational technology and e-learning
- Web of Knowledge/Web of Science - large database covering science and social science

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1c. Identify Relevant Keywords

Identify keywords that will help you locate relevant literature.

1d. Identify a Boolean Search String

Boolean search logic will focus your search, saving time. Review the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Hamilton Library's Introduction to Boolean Operators. Then draft your own Boolean search string that you can use in future steps of your literature review process. *The goal is to have something you can play with and refine—it does not need to be perfect!* In your string, be sure to at least identify your topic and desired education level (e.g., higher education).

If you are interested in using GenAI to draft Boolean search strings, consider using the prompt below in your GenAI tool of choice and indicate above the output you received. *Be sure to provide the information requested in the brackets!*

> You are an academic research librarian with expertise in Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), database searching, and systematic literature review methods.Generate multiple Boolean search strings for use in academic databases (e.g., ERIC, Education Source, JSTOR) based on my SoTL research project.
>
> My project focuses on [*insert topic*]. My population is [*insert population*] at a [*insert university context*] in a [*insert discipline or other course context*]. Keywords I have already identified include [*insert keywords*].
>
> Identify key concept clusters (e.g., topic, population, method). Then generate 3–5 Boolean search strings using AND to combine concept clusters, OR to include synonyms/related terms, quotation marks for exact phrases, and truncation symbols (e.g., *) where appropriate.
>
> Tailor at least one string for broad discovery and one for narrow/precise retrieval. Ensure strings are compatible with

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major academic databases (ERIC, JSTOR, etc.).

1d. Identify Articles

Below, you will find a variety of ways to start identifying articles. Read the titles and abstracts to decide whether they might be relevant to your study.

Journal Search

Pick 1-2 journals you identified in 1a and review the titles of articles in the most recent issue(s) to identify potentially relevant articles for your SoTL project..

Database Search

Go to the Education (K-12 and Higher Ed) LibGuide and under "Quick start: best places to begin" select "ERIC (EBSCO)". Use the keywords you identified in 1c and/or 1d to search "AB Abstracts" and/or "SU Subject Term." Play around and see what you can find! (*Tip: If this type of searching is familiar to you, use the 'advanced search function' to select more search options*.)

AI Literature Search Tools

Specialized AI research tools can help you identify relevant literature for your SoTL project. For a user-friendly entry point, try posing your research question to Consensus or Elicit.
From University of Virginia Library Research Data Services (May 2026): "If you have found yourself frustrated by LLMs' willingness to make up scholarly sources, consider trying Consensus. Consensus is an AI platform that searches the scholarly literature first, and only then uses an LLM to summarize the materials it finds. Learn more at the UVA Library blog post To avoid AI hallucinations, try Consensus."

GenAI Prompt

The prompt below can be entered into your general-purpose GenAI tool of choice. *Be sure to provide the information requested in the brackets!*

> You are a researcher with expertise in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), educational research, and academic literature synthesis. I am conducting a literature review for a SoTL project focused on [*insert topic*].
>
> Please identify, synthesize, and summarize peer-reviewed empirical research related to this topic. I am looking for a scholarly synthesis that is comprehensive and well-organized.
>
> Topic Focus: The emphasis is on [*insert desired content*]

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Educational Context: Only include research relevant to [*insert the education settings of interest, including academic level and discipline; be clear if any contexts should be excluded*]

Geographic Scope: Prioritize research conducted in [*insert preferred context, e.g., the United States or similar higher education systems*]

Research Type: Focus on [insert preferred types, e.g., empirical studies—quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods, etc.]

Methodology and Frameworks: Summarize dominant research methods used in this area. Identify commonly applied theoretical/conceptual frameworks (e.g., [*insert preferred or likely frameworks*]).

Source Requirements: Only include peer-reviewed journal articles. Strictly exclude preprints, white papers, conference proceedings, blogs, or other gray literature. [*Adapt these limiters as appropriate.*] Prioritize high-quality SoTL and educational journals such as Teaching & Learning Inquiry, The Journal of Higher Education, College Teaching, Studies in Higher Education, Active Learning in Higher Education, International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, and discipline-specific journals (e.g., [*insert relevant disciplinary journals*]). Emphasize research from [*insert timeframe, e.g., last 3 years (2022-present)*]. I am already aware of work by [*insert relevant scholars*]. Please check for recent publications (2022-present) by them related to this topic.

Output Instructions: Synthesize and summarize key findings across the literature (no isolated summaries—synthesize by themes, patterns, or gaps). Highlight gaps in the current literature that could guide my study. Suggest a possible organizational structure for the literature review (by theme, method, framework, or chronologically). Provide APA-style citations with DOIs or journal titles for all sources. Do not fabricate any sources or metadata—I will independently verify each citation. You may use a chart or bullet format where helpful to convey complex comparisons.

Please allocate resources efficiently by retrieving only the highest-quality, relevant sources. Prioritize clarity, synthesis, and scholarly alignment. Avoid repetition or filler text.

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Step 2: Determine

Determine whether the articles you find are relevant to your SoTL project and store them in a way that allows you to easily find them again. You may decide to use a reference/citation manager. At the University of Virginia, options include: Zotero (free), Mendeley (free), and EndNote ($). If interested, select one, create an account, and begin adding articles.

Step 3: Consider

Consider how your study fits within this body of literature that you are exploring. Add any insights from your preliminary literature search below:

Step 4: Revise

Revise your research question(s) as needed based on the insights you gained in Step 3 below:

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