This document provides some steps to consider when preparing to research for and write essays as an LLB or Graduate Diploma in Law student.

The Library and Information Service can help you with referencing when you are preparing to write up an essay, and before that: finding the information you need to answer your essay questions.

As course work essays (LLB), or a GDL Independent Research Essay (IRE) should be independent pieces of work, you will need to put into practice the skills you’ve learned during your studies. Your question briefing notes will assist you, and there may be additional guidance to be found on your VLE. Consider re-visiting earlier research exercises and training from the beginning of your studies, or attend one of the many Digital Skills Sessions in person or online. These are provided to help you navigate the resources available to you at BPP University (library catalogue, EBooks and journals) and online legal resources (e.g. Westlaw, LexisLibrary). We also have useful tools for referencing (RefWorks) and understanding referencing and how to avoid plagiarism (Skills4Study Campus). Plagiarism may be unintentional, but could be identified in your work if you are not careful with referencing properly.

As a library service we’ve identified five key steps, and these are outlined below with a few pointers:

1. Recognise your need for information and plan a research strategy to find it

Recognise the gap between your current knowledge and what you need to know – i.e. your essay title may touch on areas you’ve already covered in classes, but may also mean you need to do some further reading around beyond your core texts and materials. Think about the topic and what it may cover, and therefore which law subject areas to consider, and if they overlap at all. Make sure you read your question and briefing information carefully - there may be pointers within the question itself. Have you been told to consider information from a certain date, or to track the impact of a specific piece of legislation or a landmark case? Which jurisdiction is relevant - do you need to look at European or any comparative Law?

Focus on your research strategy. Are you starting with a case or piece of legislation and looking for related commentary, or starting with reading books/commentary to find useful cases or
legislation? Do you need to know how the law evolved or just the most recent developments? Again, this means reading your question carefully. You may have been directed to legislation or been set a time parameter.

Think about which keywords would be useful when conducting a search for information. As you do your background reading note down the terminology used – how are legal concepts expressed, what terms are commonly used, are there any synonyms or similar words or phrases to consider? You may be able to pull out useful keywords to use when using online resources, or for looking through an index, or contents page of a book (see more in point 3).

2. Choose the right resources

Which resources will provide the information you need? Having established what you need, you must evaluate the content and coverage of resources - which online resources cover UK, EU or International law for example? What timescales do they cover? Find this out on Westlaw or LexisLibrary by using the information or coverage links within the resource itself, or view the resource descriptions on the Online Library.

Some books are published annually, others less frequently. Make sure you know how to use the library catalogue (Find a book) via the Online Library to locate possible titles – we have many more books which may only be available electronically - so browse the catalogue as well as the shelves! Although some EBook platforms can be searched separately, EBooks can also be linked to from catalogue results. We also have useful reference items such as judicial dictionaries, guides to citation etc. Under the 340 shelf mark in the libraries you will see ‘skills’ books that may help you with your approach to research, using a legal library and writing law essays. Some research books may be a bit detailed as they may have been written with longer dissertations in mind, but you may pick up some useful tips. As you’re doing your background reading make sure you note down your sources (see point 5 below).

Journals and current awareness services are a good source of current discussion on legal issues, legislation and new case law as they are able to publish more frequently. It is usually easier to run a subject/topic search across the all the articles available in an online resource like Westlaw or LexisLibrary. Many journal articles are written by academics and/or lawyers and provide in-depth analysis of a specific issue or topic. Some online resources cover back runs of journals, and others current, and usually index more journals than they provide full access to. If you find an abstract to a useful article during your research, check out the location of the full text journal by using the Online Library ‘Find a Journal’ search box.
Using the Online Library, the ‘Search everything’ search box is a library specific search engine from Ebsco Discovery. Using this single search box you can find articles and books from the majority of BPP’s online resources; then you can also narrow down your search – for example, you can find the most recent articles, or just find eBooks. It is very important to note that a few key resources cannot be searched in full using this service (notably Westlaw and LexisLibrary), although it may be possible to locate abstracts only of some of Westlaw’s journals content.

3. Use the resources correctly and effectively

Here you need to think about translating those keywords or legal concepts you noted down in your background reading into appropriate search strategies for online searching. Make sure you understand the online resources you are using. Some resources are quite intuitive and allow you to enter a few words without having to overcomplicate it. However, there could be a certain way to enter search terms on advanced search pages. This might differ from one resource to another. Are you able to pre-select topics or source types, and can you narrow down, or search within your first set of results?

Keep a record of your search strategies. Think about whether your search strategy is too broad - it is quite easy to be overwhelmed by the quantity of results. Conversely, a narrow search could mean you retrieve very little or nothing at all. Learning online search techniques can help you manage this more effectively. Most online resources also have built in tutorials and guides.

Please remember you can ask library staff general questions about content, methodology, functionality, and correct citation when you are completing assessed work, but we may not directly answer a very specific research question – i.e. if you are trying to find journal articles we may consider it more helpful to demonstrate the principle of how to search, or where to look, as opposed to doing the search for you and sending you the articles.

4. Capture and evaluate the material you’ve retrieved

How authoritative is the information you’ve found? Are you using primary sources (legislation and cases) or commentary (books, journal articles, discussion of the law)? If you are using commentary - is there a bias? Is it up to date? How far does it help you with your question? Do you need to look elsewhere? Evaluate the authority of any resource – be careful about anything you locate on the internet and use it in a discerning way – think about who put it there, and their credentials, and how often has it been maintained and updated.
If you find things online, do you know how to save to a folder or file, how to print or email results to yourself? Most students are comfortable with doing this as you do it for nearly everything, but with online resources you often get additional options to print in full, extracts, or make a selection. Again, some online resources may have helpful ways you can track and record work as you go along. Have you made a note of your search strategies – will they be saved online, and if so, for how long? Are you familiar with RefWorks and ‘exporting’ references into a bibliography if you wish to use this service?

5. Organise, apply and communicate your new information

When you’ve retrieved and evaluated information, and feel ready to write it up, you need to cite and reference correctly. The library has a short guide to OSCOLA (Oxford Standard for the Citation of Legal Authorities) and this is the footnote referencing system you should use. A full and free PDF version of the OSCOLA guide (4th edn, Hart 2012) is also available.

Don’t leave the referencing and bibliography until the end! You can include items in a bibliography that you’ve read and then decided not to use – this can demonstrate the breadth of your reading. Ideally you should be noting down your sources as you go along. Look to see how you should reference materials first so you know what information you need i.e. website address, date, or for books and journals - author, edition, title and so on. Otherwise, you may need to look at books again in order to reference them correctly. Again, make sure you’ve read your briefing sheet and that you’ve looked at your VLE for guidance from tutors about the content of a research trail if that is a requirement for your essay.

If you are not familiar with inserting footnotes, or saving work using Office365, consider attending a training session to help you improve your practical skills. It is possible to sign up to take Microsoft Office Specialist exams in Word too. Some students may need to present their work online to an assessor. Again, we also have online training and videos to help you to prepare and practice presentation techniques.

Please do not hesitate to contact the Library & Information Service for more assistance by speaking to your campus Librarian, or contacting us via library@bpp.com.