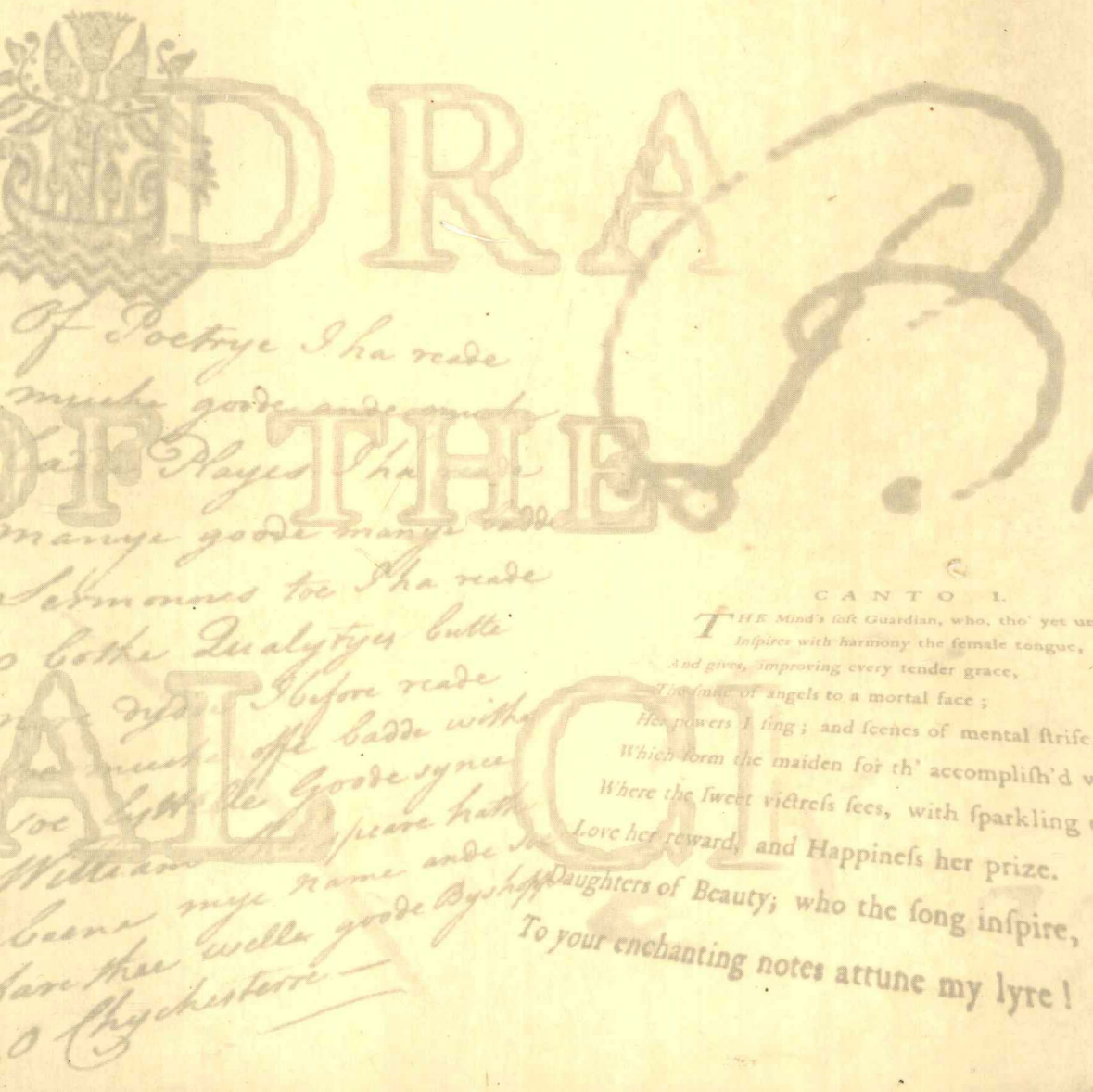


A Handbook to Literary Research

edited by Simon Eliot and W.R. Owens



Of Poetrie I ha made
much gode and much
Latter Playes I ha made
manye gode manye
Sermones too I ha made
bothe Quailtyes butte
more dyffere I before made
a much offe badde with
of little Goode synne
William Shakespeare hath
beene mye name ande so
have thee wella gode Byshopp
O Chycheesterre —

CANTO I.

THE Mind's soft Guardian, who, tho' yet un
Inspires with harmony the female tongue,
And gives, improving every tender grace,
The smile of angels to a mortal face;
Her powers I sing; and scenes of mental strife
Which form the maiden for th' accomplish'd v
Where the sweet victress sees, with sparkling
Love her reward, and Happiness her prize.
Daughters of Beauty; who the song inspire,
To your enchanting notes attune my lyre!

A Handbook to Literary Research

edited by Simon Eliot and W.R. Owens



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1 INTRODUCTION TO THE HANDBOOK

by Simon Eliot and W.R. Owens

Undertaking any programme of postgraduate study or piece of independent research work in literature is both an exciting and a daunting prospect. The aim of this Handbook is to make the whole process of research more exciting and less daunting – and, we might add, more productive and more rewarding.

How are we to do this?

- firstly, by introducing you to the range of research skills and methods needed by anyone who wants to do the job effectively and productively
- secondly, by offering you a broad survey of the wide variety of intellectual endeavour that now characterizes the study of literature at postgraduate level
- thirdly, by providing advice and guidance on what is frequently the most tricky (and most postponed) part of research – writing up the dissertation or thesis
- fourthly, by giving you a substantial quantity of useful and usable information in the form of a glossary and a large bibliographical Checklist.

Although you could certainly gain something by dipping into the book, you may well find it better to start by reading Parts 1–4 in sequence as they build steadily from learning about using libraries and IT, to writing the final dissertation. Once you are familiar with its contents, you could keep this Handbook by you for frequent reference.

All the contributors are, or have been, full-time academics at The Open University, and so they share the tradition of skilful at-a-distance university teaching for which the OU is famous. The chapters have certain characteristics in common, therefore: they all include the identification of key ideas and texts within their subject; they all involve discussion of the significant developments in their field; they all discuss the specific nature of research within their subject; and they all include a set of ‘Questions and exercises’ designed to get you to practise the knowledge and skills that you learnt as you worked your way through the given chapter. At the same time the Handbook has a variety of voices because of the wide range of experts who have contributed to it, and we hope that the reader will find this stimulating and refreshing.

Although much of the material in this Handbook was originally written for The Open University’s MA in Literature programme, it is more widely applicable: in practice the basic skills and knowledge required to complete an MA successfully are the same as those needed by students beginning a research degree (an M.Phil. or Ph.D) and, indeed, by anyone in or outside higher education wishing to pursue independent research in literature. For this reason the Handbook is best thought of as a general guide to basic techniques for anyone wishing to undertake literary research.

Structure and content of the Handbook

Part 1: Tools of the trade

Every postgraduate student needs, like any apprentice, to understand and to be able to use effectively the tools of his or her trade. Part 1 is an introduction to the basic research methodologies of literature; for convenience we have divided it into two chapters:

Chapter 2 deals with the traditional range of skills associated with the effective use of a research library and its contents (by 'research library' we mean a university library, or a major city library, or one of the great national libraries). The chapter includes a list of practical questions and exercises which will help you test your growing competence in this set of key skills.

Chapter 3 introduces you to the use of information technology (IT) in literary research, and in particular looks at the ways in which the Internet is becoming an increasingly important scholarly tool. Although the chapter applies to the Internet generally, we also take the opportunity to introduce the reader to The Open University's MA home page (on the Internet) as a way of illustrating the points made. The MA home page contains links to most of the scholarly research resources mentioned in the chapter, and anyone with access to the Internet is welcome to use it.

Parts 2 and 3:

Textual scholarship and book history

Literary research and literary theory

Thirty years ago it was reasonably easy to define literary research: it was either a critical analysis of a text or group of texts ('literary criticism'), or it was an attempt to put a text or group of texts into some form of historical context (usually thought of as 'literary history'). Since the 1960s, however, the subject has been expanded, enriched and complicated by a whole set of new influences – literary theory in all its rich variety, of course, but also developments in the history of the book as a material object. A further enriching influence has been the arrival of IT in a form that is powerful and cheap enough to be applied extensively in literary studies; it can be used for anything from the linguistic analysis of a complete novel, to the retrieval – from the Internet – of the latest information on post-colonial studies.

Literary studies has proved to be a broad church, and the arrival of new approaches has tended to modify rather than exclude the more traditional forms of study; this has resulted in a rich but potentially confusing range of approaches from which to choose. Thus one of the aims of this Handbook is to provide a brief guide to what a student might choose in terms of approach. This guide is divided into two parts. The first – Part 2, 'Textual scholarship and book history' – is concerned with the more his-

torical and empirical aspects of literature and deals with classic bibliography in all its variety (Chapter 4), with the new subject of book history (Chapter 5), and with the disciplines of scholarly editing (Chapter 6). Although these subjects are discussed in discrete chapters, their interconnectedness is made clear.

Part 3 moves you on to a different set of approaches of a more theoretical kind. Chapter 7 is a broad study of the developments in literary criticism in, roughly, the first half of the century – from ‘New Criticism’ to structuralism. Having set the context, we then have a series of chapters (8–12) covering the main contemporary theoretical positions from gender studies through to post-colonial theory. As with Part 2, there are some clear intellectual links between these theoretical positions, and the reader will find that there are possibilities for creatively combining two or more.

Part 4: The dissertation

When the area of study has been selected, the approach understood and the tools of the trade sharpened, the job itself is still to be done. The ultimate aim of most literary research is to produce some critical, theoretical or historical writing that either is a piece of original research or proves the candidate’s ability to produce such research. In most cases such work takes the form of a thesis or dissertation. All of the contributors to this Handbook are aware that, ultimately, the student has to sit down in front of a blank sheet of paper or screen and write a formal piece of scholarly prose. But in addition we offer a sizeable chapter on ‘planning, writing and presenting a dissertation’, and this includes down-to-earth advice on choosing a topic, preparing a research proposal, writing the dissertation and ensuring that it is properly presented. We also include advice on scholarly conventions of presentation and give you practical examples of how these work.

In part, learning to write in a scholarly way is about acquiring good writing habits early. For example, you should train yourself – whenever in a piece of writing you refer to the origin of your information – to provide the necessary evidence in terms of a properly referenced source. When making notes, you should always record the exact location of your information – including page numbers so that, if you or anyone else wanted to check that information, it could be done quickly and accurately. None of this is very complicated, but it does require you to understand and use the ‘scholarly conventions’. These are discussed in this part, and you should make sure that you get the hang of them as soon as possible and practise them as much as you can.

Part 5: Reference

Any subject, even one that should pride itself on the clarity and exactness of its language, will need occasionally to use jargon and abbreviations, and literature is no exception. In order to ensure you are not slowed down by this, we have provided a ‘jargon survival kit’ in the form of a short Glossary.

This is by no means exhaustive, but we have provided explanations of the most common terms that you are likely to meet in your research. As with most other sections in the Handbook, we round off the Glossary with a short list of reference books to which you can turn if necessary.

The Checklist is perhaps that part of the book to which you will return most frequently throughout your period of research. It lists, describes and occasionally discusses the huge variety of catalogues, bibliographies, dictionaries and multifarious other reference works – in printed, microform and electronic versions – without which literature as a scholarly discipline would hardly be possible. As with every other chapter of this book, the Checklist cannot hope to be comprehensive. But it should provide you with a good introduction to the most important material, and will give you plenty of leads that you can follow up in your own research library or via the Internet.

The Handbook and how to use it

This Handbook is not designed merely to be read once, as an introduction: it is meant to accompany you from start to finish. For this reason we don't just tell you how to go about literary research, we also *show* you how to do it and provide you with much of the initial material that you will need.

Postgraduate work in literature, as in any subject, is about becoming more intellectually independent. This means that you spend much less time in a seminar room with a prescribed and restricted range of texts, and much more time in research libraries working through an extended list of texts that you yourself, to a large extent, have compiled.

Selected and suggested reading

One of the Handbook's functions, then, is to send you off to read extensively and critically. For this reason there is a strong emphasis on what we have described as 'Selected reading'. This consists of lists of books, articles and other material relevant to the topic under discussion, at least some of which you ought to consult. Lists of 'Selected reading' occur throughout the book, and sometimes a chapter will include a number of them. They are often quite long because we are acutely aware that even the best research libraries are nowadays struggling to maintain and update their stocks. This means that the research library you choose will not necessarily have all the works we would like you to consult, so we offer a broad range out of which you should be able to construct a list of works accessible to you.

Sometimes the link between the Handbook and the scholarly books it recommends is even closer, with the writer constructing a dialogue between a specified book and his chapter. In these cases, precise page or chapter references are given, and the books may be listed in a separate category called 'Suggested reading'. In these cases it will be necessary for you to get

hold of these suggested titles if you are fully to understand the subject under discussion. These cases are few and far between and the books involved are very widely available.

Questions and exercises

Another recurrent feature of this Handbook are the sections entitled 'Questions and exercises'. These usually occur at the end of a chapter or at the end of a section within a chapter, and are designed to give you practice in using the knowledge and skills that you will have just acquired. As with the reading-lists, we have tried to offer a wide range of choices so that, whatever your intellectual interests and library resources, you should be able to find one question that interests you or, at least, is do-able. At the lowest level these 'Questions and exercises' illustrate the sorts of scholarly problem with which specialists in the field are preoccupied.

However, such questions will be much more beneficial if you actually try to answer one or two of them. This is not a trivial point: it is very easy to believe, having read something, that you understand it. But the acid test is whether you are then able to put that understanding and knowledge into your own words. If you *are* able to do so, then you can move on in the comforting knowledge that you really have grasped the key points of what you have been reading and have made the information your own.

Writing an answer does not necessarily mean producing a full, formal essay: your answer could be in the form of notes or of an essay plan. Nevertheless, given that you may well be moving towards preparing a dissertation, the more practice you can get in writing scholarly prose the better, so answering one or two of the questions in the Handbook by means of a formal essay would be a very good idea indeed. If you can't do that very often, at least put pen to paper or finger to keyboard whenever you can in response to 'Questions and exercises'. As you will learn again and again as you work through the Handbook, the early and frequent practice of good scholarly writing is the key to producing a successful (and possibly impressive) dissertation or thesis.

Themes

Although this Handbook covers the wide variety of approaches and disciplines now to be found under the banner of 'English literature', you will find that many of the authors will, while dealing with the most esoteric subjects, nevertheless mention basic reference works or techniques of study that also feature in other chapters. However diverse the disciplines of English literature appear to be, they are linked by common concerns, approaches and texts that will be relevant to you whatever the subject of your dissertation. These common strands may be as simple as the effective use of, for instance, *The Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* in all its editions, as technical as an awareness of the ways in which a text

can be corrupted in printing, or as broad as the need to understand that the nature of literary language (indeed, all language) is problematical, but these strands will, and do, crop up in different guises again and again.

Textual examples

The final feature that binds the whole Handbook together is the focus on the textual examples. One of the worst features of many books on research methods is that they frequently talk in abstractions: they discuss technique without giving a sufficient number of examples rooted in reality. Because this Handbook has its origins in the taught MA in Literature programme offered by The Open University, and because that MA was originally run with options entitled 'The Eighteenth-century Novel' and 'Poetry and Criticism, 1830–90', we decided to focus on two texts, one from each option:

Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, ed. G.A. Starr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981)

Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Selected Poems*, ed. Aidan Day (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991).

We asked all the authors to include examples from one or both of these texts, or from the periods in which they were written, in order to illustrate the points made. We have not stuck to this slavishly, but it does mean that you would probably gain even more from this Handbook if you were to get hold of these two texts and read them before working through the Handbook. However, don't worry if you can't: the examples are sufficiently broad that you are likely to find useful and relevant material even if you haven't read Defoe or Tennyson.

Providing explanations, presenting information and offering practice is what this Handbook is all about. Used properly, it should provide you at the outset with a quick and clear introduction to literary research and, later on, offer you support and guidance as your scholarly confidence grows and your work matures.

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Simon Eliot and W.R. Owens

Part 1

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

an introduction to research libraries

practical questions and exercises

the Internet and literary research

2 RESEARCH TECHNIQUES AND THE USE OF LIBRARIES

by W.R. Owens

One of the essential skills to be learned by anyone undertaking research is the ability to make the best use of libraries; researchers often waste a great deal of time by working in ignorance of quite basic reference sources or techniques for finding information and materials in libraries. However, the use of libraries is something that can only be learned *in practice* – that is to say, in the course of pursuing specific enquiries. It is when you have put to yourself some particular query and then found a reference book or other source (printed or electronic) which answers it – or which at least takes you a step forward in answering it – that the reference work and its nature and function will imprint themselves on your memory. Consequently, this chapter ends with a series of practical exercises which you might try out in a library. Each one requires you to search for some specific piece of information, or to answer some specific query or problem. The point, however, is not simply that you find the answer. It is also (and this is the heart of the matter) to encourage you to *record the route you take*, and the books or other sources you use, even if the route proves to be a very roundabout one or, in fact, leads nowhere. In Chapter 15 below, you will find ‘model answers’ to the exercises, against which you can check your own results.

Obviously, if you have not used a particular library before, you will have to spend some time just finding out where things are and learning how to use the cataloguing system. Most UK libraries classify their stock according to the Dewey Decimal Classification, devised by the US librarian Melvil Dewey, and introduced in 1876. Although there are hundreds of subdivisions, these flow from Dewey’s initial division of all knowledge into ten classes:

000	General works (including bibliographies, encyclopaedias, etc.)
100	Philosophy and related disciplines
200	Religion
300	Social sciences
400	Languages
500	Pure sciences
600	Technology (applied sciences)
700	The arts
800	Literature
900	General geography and history (including biography and genealogy)

Within ‘800 Literature’, English and Old English (Anglo-Saxon) literatures will be found at 820, immediately following American literature at 810, and

before literatures of the Germanic languages at 830. The main 820 sequence is divided into three categories, each arranged chronologically:

821: English poetry

822: English drama

823: English fiction.

This is really all you need to remember if you want to browse purposefully among the shelves of a large library: by scanning along the 800s you will soon find your way to the literature section you are interested in. In what follows, however, I am going to be concentrating on works of reference, which will mainly be found under '000: General works'.

Printed sources

At the end of this Handbook you will find a fairly extensive Checklist of libraries, reference books and other sources. This is intended to help you with a range of possible scholarly enquiries and you should look through it carefully, noting particularly how it is arranged under *headings* which point you to reference works on various *topics*. But before you launch into the Checklist, it may be helpful here just to pick out a small number of the absolutely key reference works, to highlight their importance and say a few introductory words about them. When you go to the library, search for these books on the reference shelves and have a good look at them, to begin to get to know them for yourself.

1 General guides

There are two main guides for students of literature. The longer established is *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* currently in its sixth edition, revised by Margaret Drabble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). This provides short factual accounts of authors and summaries of works, and also much useful information on allusions. There are helpful appendices on censorship, on the history of English copyright, and on the various reforms that led to the establishment of the modern calendar.

The main competition to the *Oxford Companion* is *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*, ed. Ian Ousby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988; rev. edn, 1994). As its title indicates, this takes a wider approach by including literature in English from many other countries. As well as brief accounts of authors and works, there are also useful essays on broader literary topics, such as the rise of the English newspaper, the development of libraries, Romanticism, structuralism, tragedy, and such like.

2 Bibliographical guides

The quickest way to get some basic information about the works of almost any given English author is by consulting the relevant volume of *The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, ed. George Watson *et al.*, 5 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969–77). This absolutely indispensable work covers the period from 600 up to about 1950 in a remarkably

comprehensive way. Each author entry includes a checklist of works in chronological order, together with the main bibliographical and critical studies up to about 1970. In addition to the author bibliographies, there are also extremely useful subject bibliographies in each volume – covering, for example, travel writing, book publishing, education and political thought. Though not without errors, omissions and sundry weaknesses (it is currently undergoing revision, planned for publication in the next few years), the *NCBEL*, as it is referred to, is a work you should become thoroughly acquainted with as soon as possible.

Another work you should get to know is the *British Library General Catalogue of Printed Books*. The copy in the famous (and now closed) Round Reading Room in the British Museum extended to over two thousand large volumes, incorporating details of all works acquired up to 1975, when the library began cataloguing its accessions on computer. This unique catalogue has been published as *The British Library General Catalogue of Printed Books to 1975*, 360 vols (London, Munich, New York, Paris: Clive Bingley and K.G. Saur, 1979–87), with a further *Supplement*, in six volumes (London, Munich, New York, Paris: K.G. Saur, 1987–8). It has subsequently been extended by nearly 200 volumes, to include works acquired between 1976 and 1994. Most decent-sized libraries hold a copy of this published edition, now known as *BLC*, and it is also accessible through the World Wide Web and available on cd-rom. What makes the *General Catalogue* invaluable is, quite simply, its massive size. The British Library has the richest collection in the world of English literature, and so its catalogue represents the most exhaustive author bibliography available. Under each author's name you will find their own works, followed by works about them. Anonymous works are entered under their titles.

3 Articles in learned journals

Once you have tracked down information about *primary* sources (details of works published by the author you are studying, etc.), you will obviously want to find what has been written about your author (i.e. the *secondary* source material). It's fairly easy to trace books using bibliographies and library catalogues (see above), but more difficult to get hold of references to articles in learned journals. For these, perhaps the best place to start is the *MLA International Bibliography of Books and Articles on the Modern Languages and Literatures* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1922–). Each large volume of this series covers one year, and entries are arranged under period and author. It is therefore very simple to look up the entry on, say, Hardy and find both general articles and articles on specific works. Trawling through the printed volumes is fairly laborious, but it will produce a tolerably comprehensive list of articles; these can then be read if the library you are working in holds copies of the relevant journals, or copies can be ordered using inter-library loan. Since 1981 the *MLA Bibliography* has also been published on cd-rom, and your library may have a copy: it obviously offers a much quicker way of locating the information you want.

The *MLA Bibliography* is the most comprehensive source, but also very useful is the *Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature*, published since 1920 by the Modern Humanities Research Association (Cambridge: Bowes and Bowes, 1921–). *The Year's Work in English Studies* (London: English Association, 1919–; published annually), though more selective, offers informed comment on works listed.

4 Biographical dictionaries

The *Oxford Companion* and *Cambridge Guide* (see 1 above) give thumbnail sketches of the biographies of authors, but for more information you should turn first to *The Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, 63 vols (London: Smith, Elder, 1885–1900); reprinted in 21 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1917); and with various supplements thereafter, including, most recently, a volume sub-titled *Missing Persons*, ed. C.S. Nicholls (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Obviously much new information on authors may have come to light since the *DNB* was written, so information should whenever possible be checked against more up-to-date biographies. Plans are afoot for a major revision and expansion of the *DNB*, but in the meantime it remains the most convenient starting place for information of this kind, particularly since most entries conclude with a bibliography.

5 General encyclopaedias

Finally, mention should be made of works such as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and *Chambers Encyclopaedia*. It hardly needs saying what an amazing source of information these are – except that some students take a long time to discover this and waste much time in the interim!

Computerized information

As you will no doubt be aware, when you go into a library nowadays you may well find that the only available catalogue of its collections is in computer (i.e. online) form. The computer offers a simple and efficient way of searching for a particular author by name, or for a particular book by its title.

Where more experience and thought are needed is in making the best use of the computer as a *subject* catalogue. This entails thinking about which 'key words' will be most likely to lead you to works on the subject of your enquiry. What must always be remembered is that each library classifies books in its collection according to its own selection of key words. Thus, to give an example:

if you were doing research on the representation of orphans in nineteenth-century literature, you might search not simply under *orphans*, but also under synonyms and related or similar words such as *foundling*, *charity*, *fostering* and the like. But these may not yield much, so you might also need to think of larger terms used to describe books