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Making the Most of Google Scholar in Academic Libraries

Mention the term “Google Scholar” in an academic library and be prepared for a variety of reactions. Most students find it an easy-to-use, comprehensive and highly effective search tool; they use it as a one-stop shopping place for their research needs. Although some librarians suggest it as a tool for searching, not many of them actively promote it. What is it about Google Scholar that makes some librarians hesitant to recommend it, and is it time to reconsider ideas about this product?

Familiar and intuitive

Anything free of charge is immediately suspect, and usually with good reason. When libraries pay a significant amount of money for proprietary databases, we wonder if something offered for free is inferior. In addition, “Google” is the first word in “Google Scholar,” and many librarians know that relying on the former to find scholarly resources is rarely an effective search strategy. Google Scholar may be too close a relative to its parent, thereby suffering from guilt by association. But the audience Google Scholar targets, the types of resources it includes, and the way it sorts and refines search results is different from its parent search engine.

Created in 2004 for an academic readership, Google Scholar works because libraries partner with it to provide access to scholarly resources. According to its own guidelines for inclusion, Google Scholar consists “primarily of scholarly articles—journal papers, conference papers, technical reports, or their drafts, dissertations, pre-prints, post-prints, or abstracts. Content such as news or magazine articles, book reviews, and editorials is not appropriate for Google Scholar.”¹ More importantly, blogs, wikis, ask-an-expert sites, forums and commercial sites are also excluded—resources that constitute a large part of the results in an average Google search and are not suitable for academic research.

Students prefer Google Scholar to library databases because its interface is familiar and its search function

is intuitive. Some librarians worry that ease of use translates into inferior search results. A recent article comparing simple and expert searches demonstrates not only that simple searches are more effective generally than complex ones but also that simple Google Scholar searches are more effective than comparable ones in eight proprietary databases.²

Will students’ information literacy skills deteriorate if they rely on Google Scholar? Certainly our library databases require a level of sophisticated searching that Google Scholar does not. But we should not forget that each database works in silo, operating in accordance with its own rules. Are we really helping our students to become effective, lifelong information searchers by urging them to learn the idiosyncratic procedures of a myriad of databases, ones that most of them will never have access to once they graduate?

What we do know from two large OCLC studies is that 83 percent of students start academic research at a search engine; none of them begin at a library website; and even dedicated researchers satisfice when searching, accepting “good enough” results.³ Most of our users do not want or need to know how to search like a librarian. We need not fear that our users will obtain substandard search results. Studies demonstrate that Google Scholar performs as well as and often better than its competitors.⁴

We can view Google Scholar as a back door to our library resources—one that offers a host of advantages for users. This database

- is intuitive to use
- provides an uncluttered and jargon-free interface
- is a familiar brand
- is comprehensive
- links to scholarly resources
- is freely available to everyone
- can be accessed after graduation
- provides citation searching

- links to open access resources and university repositories
- works with citation management systems
- offers emails alerts on topics of interest

Useful starting point


Google Scholar is often more current than library databases, which can be slow to index new articles. Google Scholar claims, in fact, to add new material several times a week.⁵ In an academic environment that is increasingly interdisciplinary, a comprehensive tool such as Google Scholar is a great asset. Research has shown that students doing cross-disciplinary research prefer it to a federated search tool such as MetaLib.⁶ As increasing numbers of patrons search for articles from outside the library building and as more courses are delivered through distance education, a search tool that is intuitive and requires no instruction will only increase in value and usage.

Ironically, even though our patrons often start with Google Scholar, many of them end up, by virtue of the link resolver, with our library resources. Can Google Scholar replace our specialized library databases? Each database provides unique results, so no one product is comprehensive on its own. Google Scholar can provide a useful starting point or an additional database to our proprietary ones.

What should our role be moving forward? A big source of frustration for first-time users of Google Scholar is the inability to access the full text of articles. Providing instruction on how to set up the link resolver is an opportunity for us to give users additional search tips. We can introduce them to added options by not only demonstrating the search features in the advanced search screen but also showing them how and when to use the “cited by,” “related articles” and version links. Highlighting additional features such as the citation management export option, the email alert service, the broad subject area and date limiters can help our patrons make better use of the product. By giving users the information they need about Google Scholar, we can increase our usefulness and relevance.

Granted, Google Scholar is not without its flaws. The only field it searches is the title; the default search—words within an article—retrieves too many irrelevant records; sorting is only by relevance; truncation is not recognized; controlled vocabulary is not used; metadata is not always reliable. What it does

do, though, is provide our users with a tool they can use in a way they prefer. This is no small achievement.

According to ACRL’s “2012 Top Ten Trends in Academic Libraries,” “convenience affects all aspects of information seeking.”⁷ By paying attention to and building on the preferences of our users, we can both help them become better searchers and increase our relevancy. Let’s embrace and promote Google Scholar as an extremely useful and convenient tool for our students and faculty. 

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Notes

- ¹ Google Scholar, [Inclusion Guidelines for Webmasters](#).
- ² William H. Walters, “Comparative Recall and Precision of Simple and Expert Searches in Google Scholar and Eight Other Databases,” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 11, no. 4 (2011): 971-1006.
- ³ Cathy De Rosa et al., [Perceptions of Libraries, 2010: Context and Community. A Report to the OCLC Membership](#) (Dublin, OH: OCLC Online Computer Library Center, 2011), 54; Susan Kroll and Rick Forsman, [A Slice of Research Life: Information Support for Research in the United States](#) (Dublin, OH: OCLC Online Computer Library Center, 2010), 16.
- ⁴ See, for example, Jared L. Howland, Thomas C. Wright, Rebecca A. Boughan and Brian C. Roberts, “How Scholarly Is Google Scholar? A Comparison to Library Databases,” *College and Research Libraries* 70, no. 3 (2009): 227-34; and William H. Walters, “Google Scholar Search Performance: Comparative Recall and Precision,” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 9, no. 1 (2009): 971-1006.
- ⁵ Google Scholar, [Search Tips](#).
- ⁶ Ya Wang and Pamela Howard, “Google Scholar Usage: An Academic Library’s Experience,” *Journal of Web Librarianship* 6, no. 2 (2012): 94-108.
- ⁷ ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee, “2012 Top Ten Trends in Academic Libraries: A Review of the Trends and Issues Affecting Academic Libraries in Higher Education,” *College and Research Libraries News* 73, no. 6 (2012): 316.

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