



## Searching in Digital Databases: A Workshop

**Keywords:** Search terms, digital databases, women in the nineteenth century, sensation/spectacle

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### Introduction:

This activity was originally taught in a small, undergraduate survey-level course on nineteenth-century literature at Rutgers University. As such, it works well with students who may not have had experience using digital databases/archives before but also in settings where the instructor can walk around the room to answer questions as they arise.

This course focused on topics of gender, spectacle, and sensationalism in the nineteenth century, particularly in Britain, and these themes informed the suggested search terms and archives/databases chosen. Because this activity focuses on introducing students to specific digital archives/databases and how to search them, instructors could tailor the choice of archives and key terms to relate more directly to their course's field and/or themes. For example, for a class focused on nineteenth-century American women's print and manuscript culture, the list of archives/databases might include the Manuscript Women's Letters and Diaries and American Periodicals but keep C19: The Nineteenth Century Index

and Nineteenth Century Collections Online. Importantly, this activity is meant to make students aware of the digital databases they have access to through their institution's libraries. For this reason, instructors should educate themselves on the digital databases at their disposal first and curate the assignment's digital database list accordingly.

For this version of the assignment, students shared their findings first via a shared Google Doc in which they took notes during the research portion. Then, they shared their findings in an informal show-and-tell style presentation in class afterward. To scale this activity up, instructors could stretch the activity out over two days, telling students to create a more formal 5-10 minute presentation of the item they selected during their search that they give with more context and visual aids during another class meeting.

Students tend to express excitement over their ultimate sense of discovery with these oft-overlooked objects, even when the search process might produce some frustration. The more key term, date range, and database constraints instructors can provide in their instructions, the more this frustration is mitigated. Ideally, this lesson plan would take place after a session in which the instructor takes students to the library to have an introductory session with a librarian. This session should be directed toward introducing students to the library's resources and providing instructions in primary source literacy. Instructors should also prepare themselves for the modeling in Part 1 of this assignment by reviewing the SAA-ACRL/RBMS Joint Task Force's [Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy](#).

Overall, this session focuses on helping students find and access archival objects via online databases. It also allows them to begin to read, understand, and summarize these objects. While it does not focus on in-depth interpretation, analysis, and evaluation of the objects they find, the show and tell portion of this activity can allow students to begin to brainstorm with each other ways that they may do more with these objects in future writing assignments.

## Activities/Handouts/Discussion Questions:

- **Learning Outcomes:**

- Introduce you to digital databases you have free access to through our institution
- Become familiar with how to use key terms, date range, and other important constraints to search digital databases and online archives
- Learn more about the context of the long nineteenth century that informs this course
- Practice analyzing archival finds by considering content, context, material form, etc.

- Begin to present your findings to a larger audience by telling the class about your chosen material and some of its context
- **Task:** This assignment takes place in three parts. In Part I, the instructor models how to search a database and where to look to find information on an archival object. In Part II, students try searching online databases on their own to find archival objects. In Part III, students present their findings during a “show and tell” portion of the session during which other students can help them add to their observations and questions. These parts are described in more detail below:

#### PART I [15-20 min.]: INSTRUCTOR MODEL

1. Instructors should show students how to locate online databases through their library website, briefly demonstrating how to access all the “Suggested Databases” they provide for Part II (see Appendix A for a sample list of “Suggested Databases”). As you navigate to these databases, discuss with your students why you chose these databases for this activity, i.e. how their collections’ focus relates to the texts and topics in the course so far. [NOTE: If your institution does not have many (or any) online database access, consider using the [Library of Congress’s digitized materials](#), [HathiTrust](#), or other open-access options.
2. Select one database to focus on. Demonstrate how to navigate the site and model searching for some key terms (you can use the key terms you will provide your students during the activity, as seen in Appendix A, or you can ask your students to offer some potential search terms). Invite students to comment on how the site functions. Example questions you can pose to the class include:
  - a. Who has created/managed this database? What does it claim to focus on? What are the organizing features of its collections and why might this be its focus?
  - b. How does one search this database? What kind of search criteria does it allow for and what doesn’t it allow you to search by?
  - c. What is the platform like for displaying results? For displaying the objects themselves? How easy is it to look at, navigate, zoom? What kind of information do these displays make obvious or hide?
  - d. Based on this practice search, what might be frustrating about navigating this site? How could we try this search again to better limit or target our search results?
3. After conducting a few sample searches, collaborate with your students on selecting one of the search results that looks interesting to take a closer look at one archival object that turned up. Spend some time discussing this object, noting in particular what information

- the site provides about it and asking them what information they don't see that they still may want to know about the object.
4. Use a digital whiteboard tool like [FigJam](#) to create an entry for the object. Ask students to participate by adding the elements of the archival object that you will ask your students to find in Part II: object image, title, author, date, publication, and a link. Students can also add comments, observations, and questions they have about the object. Debrief the additions students have made before introducing Part II.

## PART II [20-25 min]: INDIVIDUAL STUDENT SEARCHES

Provide students with the following instructions. During the activity, walk around the room to check in on their progress, answer questions, and assist in their search processes.

1. **Choose a database to search.** You can base this decision of your interests in the course so far, but don't belabor the decision too much; any of the suggested databases will be fine. [NOTE: a suggested list has been provided—see Appendix A—but students can choose a different database if they'd like; however, it should still be related thematically to the content of the course.]
2. **Choose your search terms.** Use one of the search terms provided to begin conducting searches on the database. If you'd rather, you're invited to choose other search terms related or adjacent to your research essay. If you do so, try different wordings, combinations, and subject areas. Add new terms to your search list based on names, places, and titles that you find. [NOTE: a suggested list has been provided—see Appendix A—but students can choose different key terms if they'd like; however, they should still be related thematically to the content of the course.]
3. **Set a date range or other parameters on your search.** As we just saw, too wide a search can yield overwhelming results. Selecting between 1-5 years can help narrow a glance at a historical moment. You may want to consider choosing a 1-5 date range that overlaps with the publication dates of the texts we've read so far in this course.
4. **Document your findings.** Select at least one archival object you found that develops your thinking about the themes of this course in some way. Document the following information about it in the provided Google Doc:
  - a. Object image
  - b. Title
  - c. Author
  - d. Date
  - e. Publication
  - f. Database link

See Appendix A for a sample assignment sheet that can be provided to students for this part of the activity

### PART III [20-25 min.]: SHOW AND TELL

Warn students that they will need to be ready to talk briefly in class about their archival finds. You can frame these brief presentations as “show and tells.” Ask students to answer, at minimum, the following questions in their show and tell:

1. Why did you choose this object? What about it interested you in the context of this course? What search terms and parameters did you use to locate it?
2. Who is the audience for this? Why you think it might have been created? How do you imagine it was circulated (if it was)?
3. What lingering questions do you have about this object that would require further research? These questions can be practical (perhaps the date was unclear, or you want to learn more about how this object was produced) or theoretical/analytic (perhaps you’re interested in how it relates to something we read in a text or have questions about what this object might indicate about the period’s gender norms, etc.).

After each show and tell, there will be time for the rest of the class to ask questions or offer additional observations. Students can take these observations and questions forward in the course if they choose to continue working with the archival object they located in a future writing assignment.

- **Purpose:** This course will be considering topics of gender, spectacle, and sensationalism in the nineteenth century, but none of the authors or texts we read exist in a vacuum. To get a better sense of the world in which these authors and texts existed, this activity will give you an opportunity to explore the more quotidian materials related to our course’s key topics that circulated at the time. In addition to giving you more historical, social, and cultural context about the world we’re diving into, this activity will also introduce you to some digital databases you have access to that you can revisit when it comes time to write your research essay (and show you how to search them!). Finally, the objects that you find through database searches today may be objects you continue to analyze in papers later this semester.

- **Criteria/Grading:** Students should include the title, author, publisher, image, and database link to the material they've chosen in the provided, shared Google Doc. See Appendix B for examples. During their presentation, they should also attempt to explain some kind of context for this material (where they think it circulated, why they think it was created and for what audience, etc.) and have some thoughts on why they were interested in it. Those thoughts do not have to be formal analyses yet, but they should begin to raise some interesting questions for the class. While this version of this assignment was for participation points and not graded, instructors could introduce more explicit constraints on this presentation portion of the assignment in order to more formally grade it.

## Contextual Materials/Resources/Further Reading:

- No additional readings are required for students in this activity. However, instructors can choose additional readings to pair this with that informs the search terms and digital databases they suggest, if they'd like. Additionally, instructors may want to consult the following resources in preparation for modeling this assignment in Part 1:
  - SAA-ACRL/RBMS Joint Task Force's [Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy](#)
  - The ACRL Board's [Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education](#)

# Appendix A: Sample Assignment Sheet

## Digital Archive Workshop

**Step 1: Choose a database.** You may begin with whichever database you would like. After some preliminary searching, you can continue to explore the same database, or choose a new one.

Library link: <https://www.libraries.rutgers.edu/databases>

Suggested databases:

- British Periodicals
- C19: The Nineteenth Century Index
- Defining Gender
- London Low Life
- Nineteenth Century Collections Online
- Victorian Popular Culture

**Step 2: Choose your search terms.** You are invited to choose search terms related or adjacent to your research essay or to explore another topic that interests you. Try different wordings, combinations, and subject areas. Add new terms to your search list based on names, places, and titles that you find.

Suggested search terms to get started:

- Title/Author of work you are writing about
- Theaters
  - Lyceum
  - Covent Gardens
  - Drury Lane
  - Astley's
  - the Surrey
  - Sadler Wells
  - the Victoria
  - Britannia
- New Woman, women's dress
- Circus

- Melodrama
- Native American
- India
- Pantomime
- Vampire (Planche, LeFanu, Stoker)
- Extravaganza

**Step 3: Set a date range or other parameters on your search.** As we've just seen, too wide a search can yield overwhelming results. Selecting between 1-5 years can help narrow a glance at a historical moment. Consider selecting a 1-5 year period that overlaps with the original publication date of one of the texts we've read for this course.

**Step 4: Share your findings.** Select at least one archival object you found that develops your thinking about the themes of this course in some way. Document the following information about it in the provided Google Doc:

- Object image
- Title
- Author
- Date
- Publication
- Database link

Be ready to present a brief "show and tell" of your findings to the class. Make sure when you share your findings with the class in just a few moments, you answer the following questions:

1. Why did you choose this object? What about it interested you in the context of this course? What search terms and parameters did you use to locate it?
2. Who is the audience for this? Why you think it might have been created? How do you imagine it was circulated (if it was)?
3. What lingering questions do you have about this object that would require further research? These questions can be practical (perhaps the date was unclear, or you want to learn more about how this object was produced) or theoretical/analytic (perhaps you're interested in how it relates to something we read in a text or have questions about what this object might indicate about the period's gender norms, etc.).



# Appendix B: Sample Student Findings from Google Doc

## Student 1 [Name redacted]:

Database: Defining Gender

Title: Girlhood and Wifhood, Practical and Counsel and Advice

Publisher: The "Family Doctor" Publishing Co

1896

Link:

<http://www.gender.amdigital.co.uk.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/Documents/Details/Girlhood%20and%20Wifhood>

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**SHARP, PERRIN, & Co., 31, Old Change, E.C.**  
**STAPLEY & SMITH, 128, London Wall, E.C.**

Student 2 [Name redacted]:

Database: British Periodicals

Title: Ladies Supplement

Author:N/A

Date: October 1st, 1895

Publication: The London Journal

Link:

https://www.proquest.com/britishperiodicals/docview/3510502/8FB61205E62F4682PQ/3?accountid=13626



Database: Victorian Popular Culture

Title: Madame Card, World-Famed Wizard Queen

Author:N/A

Date: December 1st, 1873



Database: Nineteenth Century Collections Online  
 Title: Ladies' Bicycle  
 Author: N/A  
 Date: June 1895  
 Publication: The Designer and the Woman's Magazine

**Student 4 [Name redacted]:**

Search terms: North American Indians, British, American, Native Indian Life

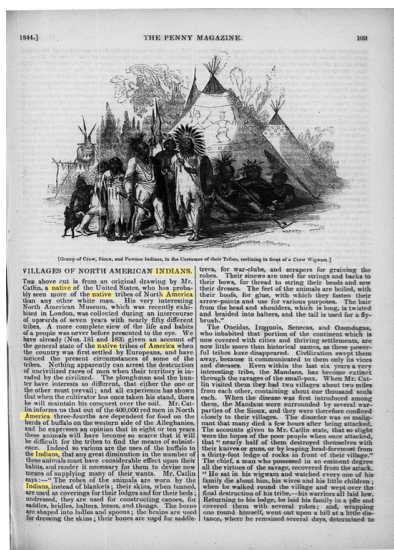
Database: British Periodicals

Author: Knight, Charles

Date: March 23, 1844

Link to Article:

<https://login.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fhistorical-periodicals%2Fvillages-north-american-indians%2Fdocview%2F2805527%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D13626>



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**Student 5 [Name redacted]:**

Database:London Low Life

Title:"Magazine of Magic, Conjurers Companion "

Search Terms: "Spectacle"

Date:1852-1862

Author: Henry Lea

Link:<https://www.londonlowlife.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Detail/magazine-of-magic/570727?itm=570728>



Database:London Low Life

Title:The Sultan of Zanzibar! His country, his people ...

Search term:Spectacle

Date:??

Author:E. Morris

Link:<https://www.londonlowlife.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Detail/the-sultan-of-zanzibar-his-county-his-people-.../577671?item=577675>

