

Research Library Guide

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<http://ischoolsjsu.libguides.com/pandemics/>

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Creating this LibGuide on pandemics, despite their tragic, bleak, frightening realities they've engendered throughout human history, was an interesting and even enjoyable exercise in certain respects. Perhaps one proxy for that is the fact that now that I've finished creating it (or have finally been forced by the clock to stop adding to and fiddling with it), I actually want to go through all the resources I've compiled and read them in full. The biggest challenge was trying to deal with such a massive topic. This would have been difficult even if I had limited my focus to, for example, the history of plague in Europe, or to some specialization within one of the several scientific disciplines which study pandemics: virology, epidemiology, immunology, infectious disease, microbiology, etc. On this latter point, my relative lack of scientific literacy actually aligns well with the purpose of the LibGuide: to gather and introduce resources that provide a rudimentary background or primer on the primary topic and, to a lesser extent, on related subjects. At the onset of the project I had a notion that I'd like the LibGuide to replicate an in-person reference conversation in some oblique way. Over time however I found myself making paring back the descriptive commentary I'd made – the introduction to the guide on the home page and on the main books page are essentially the only examples that remain – and decided it would be more effective to learners if the navigation and the ordering of content in the guide performed the work of enabling an information discovery and research process. I wasn't sure whether this was to be accomplished despite or because of the LibGuide's non-linearity as a whole.

I initially decided to center my LibGuide on the coronavirus / COVID-19 pandemic, but I quickly realized that it would be impossible to find reference works and fiction and non-fiction books that address that topic. Goodreads.com does list a fair number of non-fiction titles

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related to coronavirus, but the vast majority appear to be Ebooks or print-on-demand books of an instructional, religious or even conspiratorial bent; nothing I would deign particularly useful except perhaps to someone studying coronavirus in popular culture in the US. I knew there was a good deal of high-quality journalism, commentary and other content about coronavirus and COVID-19 in the online and print press (along with oceans of dubious content), not to mention within the seemingly endless expanses of social media, the blogosphere, email and sundry other pockets of the web. A literature review that merely examined the Twitter activity of epidemiologists, virologists and immunologists in the US over the past two months – exploring their tweets and the articles, conference literature, presentations and other material they've shared - would be a large undertaking unto itself (I know because I tried to keep up with just a fraction of it in March). These intuitions about the extent of journalistic coverage were borne out when I started to research coronavirus and COVID-19 in various King Library databases, particularly the Gale OneFile and OneFile News and ProQuest. These indexed a large number of very current documents on germane topics. I quickly grasped the fact that narrowing my focus to coronavirus would still demand intensive filtering of and selectivity towards what could only be described as voluminous sources. Between the lack of reference literature and books about coronavirus and the realization that I'd need to use thoughtful selection criteria and organize a potentially overwhelming amount of material no matter what subject I chose, I went with the broader topic: pandemics.

I spent some time exploring the example LibGuides and blogs shared with the class, and other LibGuides created by iSchool students, and that gave me some good ideas how (or how not) to organize my guide in terms of the types of literature to cover, what kind of instructional

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prose to provide, and how to create a structure that would help the intended audience: an undergrad or grad student beginning their study of this topic (I include myself in the latter camp). After some further research and reading I came to the conclusion that an optimal approach would be one that enabled users to start with more general information and progress into more specialized content, and to bring this into a structure or overlay based the major topic areas in the study of pandemics. The “major topics” just alluded to will most likely differ based on what kind of specialist you’re talking to, but I gradually recognized one seemed both valid and practical. This was a simplified overview based on the major pandemics in the past 2 millennia: from several outbreaks of bubonic plague (“Black Death”), to smallpox in early American history, to the 1918 influenza pandemic, to the HIV / AIDS pandemic and most recently of course coronavirus / COVID-19. This is a gross simplification, of course, as most of us can name any number of other devastating and terrifying infectious diseases: cholera, polio, malaria, ebola, scarlet fever and more.

While electing to survey the fields of study related to pandemics writ large, I also decided that I would include links to articles and other resources about coronavirus / COVID-19 alongside that information. My selection criteria at the broadest level was to limit myself to sources that could be construed as accessible to non-specialist students and which functioned within a collection of other sources to address the major pandemics I identified, and / or as a bonus some other salient aspect of the main topic(s). I erred on the side of finding content that offered a relatively concise introduction to a topic but also included bibliographic citations and, in the case of non-academic material, suggestions for further reading. One of the goals I pursued was to give readers the tools and guidance - terse as it usually was - to start diving into

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the subjects that interested them: links to an admittedly small selection of scholarly databases, reference and bibliographic resources, information about the Melvil and LCSH call numbers for epidemics, third party reading lists and a number of “other resources” that are, I believe, quite interesting albeit scattershot in nature. For self-starting students, these combined resources are more than enough to use as a scaffolding for investigation and discovery. The downside for users in focusing solely on these research utilities is that they will miss out on my attempts to outline the contours of the study of pandemics and their histories and the related literature (fiction, non-fiction, scholarly and journalistic articles, etc.).

Choosing which databases to include on the “Journal Databases” page was informed by my familiarity with several of them over the past two semesters. Others I found in the course of creating this LibGuide. They are of course just a small fraction of the databases that the King Library subscribes to, but I have a good deal of confidence in most of these based on time spent using EBSCO Academic Search Complete, ScienceDirect, ProQuest, and a number of the Gale OneFile databases. The Journal of Infectious Disease is a fairly obvious choice for the topic from a hard science vantage point, though probably too technical for my purposes and for my hypothetical readers. The Gale OneFile (Health and Medicine, in this case) and ProQuest databases served up the most useful search results for my pedagogical designs for my audience: each offers a variegated mix of source and document types, blending the academic with the journalistic and many other formats. I was able to locate relevant, approachable material for my visitors that provided excellent starting points from which to begin further explorations.

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As far as bibliographic and reference works, those were relatively easy to find, and each unto itself offers access to a universe of information about pandemics and infectious disease. The two volume Encyclopedia of Pestilence, Pandemics and Plagues weighs in at 920 pages, and the Gale Encyclopedias are 590 and 1120 pages respectively. The bibliographic references I linked to are extensive enough to keep anyone busy for months if not years. While I was somewhat disappointed in the results of my efforts to find scholarly work on the history of pandemics in the King Library databases, I found plenty to work with in these bibliographic sources. I'm also certain that the Encyclopedia of Pestilence, Pandemics and Plagues would fulfill this need both in the content it aggregates and in its no doubt copious citations. The reference works were the only ones I included ISBN numbers for, based on the assumption that they might allow a quicker retrieval from the reference services desk.

The process of tracking down articles was one of the more time-consuming parts of the project, and not just because I struggled with customization of the HTML / CSS markup I made to try to enhance an otherwise dreary presentation of a list of links. I decided to include six articles for each section: the first on pandemics in general and the second on coronavirus / COVID-19. This page – along with the pages on Fiction and Non-fiction books - is where the rubber met the road in terms of my ambition to provide some coverage to the major pandemics I discussed earlier. Obviously, that doesn't apply to the coronavirus links, but it does apply in the first set of links, and to the books section. If I had kept going at it for another day or two I'm sure I could come up with a longer and more representative list of pandemics / infectious diseases and their historic, social, scientific and other dimensions. Nevertheless I'm reasonably happy with what I was able to put together. Importantly, I included articles on HIV /

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AIDS, the 1918 influenza, the plague and scarlet fever, as well as a piece from May 2019 examining the question of whether we were ready for “the next influenza pandemic.” While I wasn’t thrilled with every article (Dr. Fauci’s in particular is only concerned with very limited questions about the medical and public health response to HIV), in general they provided enough background on their subjects without wading too far into the deep end. I think the majority of the coronavirus / COVID-19 links are quite interesting and, in some cases, useful even. I will likely revisit the page from Annual Reviews as it collects many recent articles, mostly from the sciences. The Birrell and Grigoryev pieces look compelling as well. My initial criteria in collecting these articles was to choose both the most relevant (in terms of my goal of providing topic overviews with references to explore) and the ones that had been cited most frequently by other scholars. Unfortunately, I had to abandon this second goal because none of the database search engines I was using had that feature. Quite a few databases do provide detail on the number of times a work has been cited, but the mechanisms depend on the database or journal and require a lot of “hunting and pecking.”

The books section was a pleasure to create, probably because it gave me a lot of ideas for titles that I’d like to get into my summer reading queue. My selection criteria with the non-fiction selections was to cover several different pandemics, and again I was only partially successful at achieving that goal. Three of the books are about pandemics and infectious disease in general, or on the ever-present threat they pose to society. I looked at reviews, awards or distinctions, and the ratings on Goodreads.com when making these choices. This was also the case with the fiction books I included. Most of the books I chose, with a couple of exceptions, were not particularly current. I discovered many books of more contemporary

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vintage through one of my suggested reading lists, but I opted to go with better known, more lauded authors instead. It is not an exaggeration to say there is an actual – nay, thriving - genre of pandemic fiction in American literature that pre-dates coronavirus (see the YouTube video on the bottom of my “Other Resources” page.) Incidentally, the “Other Resources” page has some gems, in particular the first few on coronavirus literature. Otherwise I do feel that some of the quality content on that page was orphaned in that section and would probably be overlooked, which would be a shame. If I were to re-do the “Other Resources” tab / page, I would try to better integrate into the rest of the site.

I believe that while I made some headway on fulfilling the ideals I started out with – to create a LibGuide that combined two main functions: access to organized research sources, and implicit or explicit description of the most important facets of pandemics, historically and otherwise. I fell short of realizing the complete vision I had of creating a portal to the study of pandemics. If I were to cut myself a little slack, I think it was probably too ambitious to try to create a sweeping and carefully engineered LibGuide that would meet all my objectives in a relatively short time frame.