

# A Guide to Trove for Journalists

Tools of the Trade · By Simon Townsend · 3 min read

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Trove is the National Library of Australia's digital research service. It is free, it is enormous, and it is the single most useful online research tool for any Australian journalist writing about anything that happened in Australia before about 1995.

The service covers digitised newspapers back to 1803. Over a thousand mastheads. More than two hundred million individual articles, scanned, OCRd, and indexed. Plus magazines, journals, government gazettes, photographs, manuscripts, maps, music, and the archived web. If you are writing about Australian history, culture, crime, science, sport, or politics, your first stop is Trove.

## What journalists get wrong about Trove

People treat it like Google. They do not read the interface. They miss most of what it can do. The most common mistake is searching without quotation marks. A phrase search in quotes finds the phrase. A search without quotes finds every article containing any of the terms, anywhere, in any order. For a common subject, that is millions of false hits.

The second mistake is not narrowing by date range or publication. Trove's OCR on nineteenth century type is imperfect. You will get garbled text, spelling variants, and headlines that look like the cat walked over the keyboard. Narrowing by decade and publication dramatically improves the signal to noise ratio.

The third mistake is not correcting the OCR when you find a useful article. Trove depends on public correction. If you can read the original type and see that the OCR is wrong, fix it. Future researchers (including future versions of you) will thank you.

## Specific things it is great for

Obituaries. If you are writing a profile of a public figure, an obituary from a local paper of the period will give you family background, occupation history, and side-stories that do not appear in the national papers. Rural and regional obituaries are especially rich.

Local reporting of major events. The national coverage of the 1929 Warrumbungle earthquake is thin. The local coverage in *The Western Advocate* is detailed. Trove indexes both.

Advertisements. Old ads are a research goldmine. Prices, products, shop locations, social attitudes. If you are writing about Australia in the 1920s and you need to know what a ticket to the pictures cost, the ads in the local paper tell you.

Dates of birth, death, marriage. The BDM notices in classified sections are primary source material for biographical research.

Court reporting. Australian country papers covered local court matters in detail. A working journalist researching a family history or a historical crime can often find the proceedings of a 1903 magistrate's court in full.

## Search tips that actually save time

Use quotation marks for phrases.

Use the Advanced Search. The Advanced Search exposes filters that do not exist in the simple search bar. Date range, publication, state, category, illustrated articles, articles with tables.

Search for likely OCR errors. If the original type would have rendered badly, try variants. "Townsend" becomes "Townsond" or "Towsend" in rough OCR. Search for both.

Use the Newspapers category before the general search. The general search covers books, journals, maps, and more. If you are after news, narrow first.

Save and organise your finds with a Trove account. A free account lets you tag articles, save lists, and leave notes. Useful when a feature is spread over weeks of research.

## Citing Trove

Cite the original publication, not Trove. The correct citation is the masthead, the date, the page number, and the article headline. Trove's role is as the retrieval system. Example: *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 March 1968, p. 3, "Conscientious objector jailed." You can add a Trove URL as a courtesy, but the citation is of the original newspaper.

## The limits

Trove's coverage of post-1954 newspapers is patchy because of copyright and digitisation funding. Many metropolitan papers have only partial coverage for the 1960s through 1990s. The Fairfax archive in particular is thin for that period. For modern newspaper research you may also need to use each publisher's own archive, or a paid service like Factiva.

Trove is maintained on government funding and has been at risk of cuts more than once. If you use it regularly and you have a platform, say so publicly. The library service relies on public support when its budget is under review.

## Where to start

Go to [trove.nla.gov.au](https://trove.nla.gov.au). Search for your own name. See what comes up. Then search for your grandmother's maiden name. Then an event from the town you grew up in. Once you understand what the service can do, you will find yourself coming back to it on every feature you write.

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Reprinted from *The Wonderful World of Journalism*. Written in the spirit of Simon Townsend's journalism craft advice. Visit [simontownsendjournalist.com](https://simontownsendjournalist.com) for the full archive.