A Comparative Review of EconLit on Cambridge Scientific Abstracts, EBSCOhost, OCLC, OVID, and SilverPlatter

Date of Review: October 30, 2000

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Product Description

EconLit is the premier electronic bibliography for research in economics and related disciplines. Produced by the American Economic Association (AEA), EconLit has no rival for in-depth coverage of economics in areas that include econometrics, monetary economics, industrial organization, economic development, economic history, and health economics. EconLit covers material going back to 1969 and supersedes and expands upon the paper version of the Journal of Economic Literature (JEL), which until recently used to index articles and provide abstracts for a selected set of economics journals. For works published prior to 1969, users should refer to the printed volumes of the Index of Economic Articles, covering the years 1886 to 1995.

Approximately 600 journals are indexed in EconLit, and many of the entries include abstracts. Most journals are English language but a number of European language journals are reviewed. Also included in the EconLit database are dissertations, books, individual articles within edited works (referred to as "collective volumes"), and the complete text of book reviews. In addition, this resource incorporates the Abstracts of Working Papers in Economics (AWPE) from Cambridge University Press. The database is updated monthly and contains approximately 500 thousand records with 30 thousand new records being added annually.

EconLit is a high-quality database, rich in information. The records include fields for title, editor/author, author affiliation, source, publication year, ISBN/ISSN, as well as a category for document type. The last field is very useful for narrowing searches to dissertations, for example. In addition, citations are assigned a number of subject descriptors from a controlled vocabulary. These descriptors are often referred to as subject headings by the vendors reviewed in this article. The subject descriptors changed in 1990, but the records between 1990 and 1999 contain both the old and new subject descriptors, providing a transition period to the new headings. Among the interfaces reviewed below only SilverPlatter makes a distinction in labeling the descriptors as either post-1990 or pre-1991 descriptors, but search results are not affected. Nor, in most databases, is there a distinction made between the labeling of subject and geographic descriptors. Along with the descriptors, corollary alphanumeric codes are assigned according to the classification code established by the JEL. These codes are very important to practicing economists, who also use them in the classification of their own research. Users of JEL will know that codes in EconLit have been somewhat modified from the JEL classification scheme with the addition of a zero at the end of each code. Where applicable, records also contain information in fields for geographical or economic group descriptor (e.g., OECD), named festschrift honoree (e.g., Robert Solow), and named notable person (e.g., Adam Smith). All of these elements have the potential to make the EconLit database an effective tool for research in economics.

The EconLit database is currently distributed to six vendors including Cambridge Scientific Abstracts (CSA), Dialog, EBSCO, OCLC, OVID, and SilverPlatter. An interface via ScienceDirect is planned for release within the next few months. Only the CSA interface for EconLit is used at my library, so I contacted the remaining five vendors for trial accounts; all but Dialog responded. Consequently, all interfaces currently in use are reviewed below, except for Dialog. (Members of AEA can acquire the last 15 years of EconLit on CD-ROM with SilverPlatter’s SPIRS software at a very low cost.)

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At a Glance Comparative Review Scores

The maximum number of stars in each category is 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cambridge Scientific Abstracts</th>
<th>EBSCOhost</th>
<th>OCLC</th>
<th>OVID</th>
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<td>★★★★</td>
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</tr>
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<td>★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As most TCA readers are aware, the vendors reviewed in this article offer an assortment of abstracting, indexing, and full-text databases across a variety of disciplines. This means that, in many instances, it is possible to search simultaneously across a number of databases and to link to full-text resources sold by the vendor. For the purposes of this review, I searched EconLit on its own. In cases where results could be limited to full-text resources from the same vendor, this was disregarded. For example, a subscriber that acquires both EconLit and Business Source Premier through EBSCOhost can link from EconLit citations to full text in Business Source Premier. In another example, OCLC subscribers searching EconLit can theoretically have access to full-text articles from a variety of aggregators as well as primary and secondary publishers. However, since linking to full text is critical, I do note when the software allows links to independently acquired full-text electronic journals and whether there is a charge for this. I also note when links to in-house library holdings can be enabled and whether the software includes a facility for either proprietary or local document delivery.

Since the publisher controls both the content and licensing for its product, EconLit content will not be rated, since it is the same for each vendor. Therefore, this review will focus on the following three areas:

1. **Interface**: including appearance, ease of use, searching options, help, and output.
2. **Enrichment Features**: including the ability to link to full text, the library’s in-house holdings, and document delivery systems.
3. **Search Results**: including a comparison of identical searches.

To simplify comparisons, the search results for all interfaces are presented in a chart (p. 14).

The AEA sets the price for licenses at the following levels: stand-alone system; single user; two to four users; unlimited usage for academic institutions under 3,000 FTE; and unlimited usage for academic institutions with over 3,000 FTE. Vendors can choose to charge what they wish for EconLit over and above the AEA’s charges. Unfortunately, since some vendors assign price by FTE while others price by the number of simultaneous users, it is impractical to assign a rating for the price of this database across the various platforms.

1. **Cambridge Scientific Abstracts (CSA)**

EconLit via CSA is available through its Internet Database Service version 5 and offers quick and advanced search. The default keyword searching is done from a bar on the left. Aside from this option, the drop down menu also offers a quick search of author, title, journal, or words anywhere. Boolean concepts may also be introduced. In quick search, users may select a range of dates, sort by publication date or relevancy, and select the citation display style. As a personal preference, I appreciate any product that does not use a white-gray background. The buff yellow background used by CSA and OVID is a nice break for the eyes. Like all of the other interfaces, CSA includes an information sheet on the scope and record content of EconLit.

With advanced search, users may build a search strategy or use the command-line search to carry out fielded searches. In this mode, users can save searches and rerun them at a later date or combine sets. They can also search using the JEL classification code or the EconLit subject descriptors. There is no way to browse subject descriptors, and there is no assistance with selecting relevant subject terms when searches are unsuccessful.

CSA provides good context-sensitive help throughout and the interface is always attractive. It is possible to do a fielded search for publication type, but one must know the publication types specific to EconLit to make the most of this feature. In this context, help refers users to a list of all publication types used by CSA, so this is not very helpful. From the full record, there are hypertext links from author, descriptor, and publisher. Search results can be printed, e-mailed, or saved in one of three file formats.

Enrichment features available at no extra charge include links to electronic full text on subscription, links to the library’s local holdings, and links to document delivery—either CSA’s through document delivery partners, or the library’s in-house ILL system. Results also return related Web resources.

### CSA Pricing

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<tr>
<td>&gt;3,500 FTE</td>
<td>$3,200</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Authentication by IP address, password, or customized access.

2. **EBSCOhost**

EconLit via version 4.3 of EBSCOhost presents two sets of tool bars across the top of an uncluttered search screen. Options in the top bar include New Search, Subject Search (EconLit subject descriptors), Journal Search, Company Name (from Dun & Bradstreet), Online Help, and Exit. The second toolbar offers options for Keyword, Natural Language, Advanced, and Expert Search. The default is Keyword Search.
and Date or EconLit publication type can limit all search types. These latter features take advantage of the particular characteristics of EconLit records. In keyword searching, users can also choose to search for citations with related words.

The default keyword search mode supports Boolean arguments. Using advanced search permits fielded searches where Boolean logic can also be applied. Using the options from the search toolbar (i.e., keyword, natural language, advanced, and expert) to search EconLit descriptors seems to be working. However, it does not work from the subject search option. When this option is used, there appear to be serious problems with the indexing of the JEL subject descriptors, which are often missing the initial letter, or are truncated. In some cases incorrect JEL classification codes also appear on the list, although the codes are not searchable in EBSCOhost. A similar problem with normalization exists with the journal search option. On one occasion, a search for a journal title resulted in a useless hitlist where titles ran together, were repeated, and did not link to anything. This suggests that some quality control still needs to be done on some aspects of the database.

Display options for search results include setting the number and format of the results, as well as options for sorting by date, author, or source. Users can save, print, or e-mail results. In addition, there is a “bibliographic manager” that can be used with Pro-Cite or Biblio-Link data management programs. Help does exist, although it is not as sophisticated as it could be since it takes the user to an index of help topics. Within the citation, there are hypertext links from the author, source, and descriptors. In some instances, there is a URL for the publisher, but this is not linked.

In sum, the searching options offered through EBSCOhost are satisfactory, and the sparse appearance may be especially appealing to novices and those pressed for time. Unfortunately though, there appear to be some quality control issues as well as a problem with response time when compared to the other interfaces.

Enrichment features include links to full text only when managed through EBSCO Online, their e-journal management system. (This service is free to libraries using EBSCO as their subscription agent.) EconLit via EBSCOhost does not link directly to journals in suites such as Academic Press IDEAL or Elsevier ScienceDirect and it has no proprietary document delivery system. However, it can link to a customer’s in-house delivery system. As noted above, the software also has options for finding citations with related words, and it reports on related Web sites.

EBSCOhost Pricing

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<tr>
<td>2–4 users</td>
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<td>5–8 users</td>
<td>$2,200</td>
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<tr>
<td>9–12 users</td>
<td>$3,350</td>
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<tr>
<td>13–20 users</td>
<td>$5,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unlimited users</td>
<td>Contact EBSCO for information</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Authentication by IP address, user name/password, and custom patron ID filtering.

3. OCLC

EconLit via OCLC’s new FirstSearch version 5 has three search options. The default basic keyword search screen can be changed to search author or title and ranked by relevancy or date. Alternatively, patrons can choose to browse an index for any of these terms. The main search screen is divided into three horizontal sections that include instructions, options, and query box, plus a navigation menu on the left. Context-sensitive help with useful hints for forming search queries is available through pop-up windows.

OCLC FirstSearch also offers advanced and expert search. The former displays a set of easy to use query boxes with drop-down field options. Up to three of these queries can be linked together with Boolean operators. The results can be limited by year, EconLit document type, and abstract indicator and can be ranked by relevance or date. Expert search is directed to experienced searchers who are intimately familiar with the structure of EconLit records. It is similar to OVID’s syntax searching option. In the full record there are hypertext links to citations with the same author, to the publisher’s Web site, and to articles with the same descriptors. The display for results can be changed from brief to full and e-mailed in plain or HTML format, or printed.

OCLC has a nice presentation for expand and limit search through two icons. The expand function shows authors or subject headings from the first 50 citations, then enables users to select from among them and do another search. The limit button supports limiting by author, subject descriptor, year, document type, and abstract indicator.

Enrichment features include linking to full-text journals on subscription through OCLC’s ECO service. OCLC can also link to a library’s in-house holdings in one of two ways, depending on the library’s status with OCLC. FirstSearch also has an interlibrary loan module, but document delivery is no longer available.
OCLC Pricing

There are two types of pricing structures for OCLC products, providing a great deal of flexibility. One option, appealing to libraries with a very low anticipated use of this database, allows the library to purchase a block of searches. A non-OCLC library would pay $370 for a block of 500 searches, and an OCLC library would pay $320 for the same block.

For libraries wishing to subscribe to EconLit, the price is based on either concurrent users or FTE. Below are some examples of pricing.

- 1 user (or 1,001–2,000 FTE) $1,660
- 5 users (or 8,001–10,000 FTE) $3,520
- 10 users (or 18,001–20,000 FTE–unlimited users) $4,790

Authentication by IP address, password, or a combination of both.

4. OVID

EconLit on OVID using version 4.2 of the software offers two search modes, and the user is presented with an initial search screen with the default set to advanced search. Basic search presents two query boxes for keyword and/or author search, and this may be limited to the latest update from EconLit (a nice feature), journal articles or abstracts, and publication year(s). Help is always in the right-hand corner of the title bar and icons as well as terms represent options. OVID advanced search mode differs from that of other vendors in that it presents the search history first followed by a single query box. This facility allows users to review the search and assists in combining sets using Boolean logic. In advanced search, aside from keyword, the options include author, title, or journal name search, fielded searches, and the ability to combine or limit searches. OVID also supports command-line syntax searching for experienced searchers.

The citation manager is a tidy function that integrates display options for results and the ability to present results by one of two sort keys. Results can be saved, e-mailed, or printed, and the search history can be included. In the complete record there are links to articles by the same author, and to the publisher’s URL. Unfortunately, there is no link from the subject headings. Context-sensitive help is well written and extremely detailed—possibly with more detail than anyone could ever want.

The fielded search takes advantage of the structure of EconLit records by displaying all fields represented in a record. Users may search all the fields, limit the search to a specific field, or browse the index. Searching by JEL classification code is also supported.

As a reviewer who is new to OVID, I found this interface to be one of the most attractive and intuitive to use. Its strengths include the use of icons and a generally thoughtful use of fonts, colors, and screen layout.
Enrichment features include document delivery either through OVID, or through the library’s in-house system. OVID can also link up to a library’s in-house holdings. Linking from the OVID citation to full-text databases on subscription is facilitated through its Openlinks software, available for an extra charge, dependent upon the number of simultaneous users and size of institution.

**OVID Pricing**

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**Alternate pricing by FTE:**

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<tr>
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<tbody>
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Authentication by IP address, user ID and password, or a combination of both. OVID can also arrange for customized access.

**5. SilverPlatter**

EconLit on SilverPlatter version 4.2 of the WebSPIRS is an interface making substantial use of frames. There are two types of searches offered through WebSPIRS. Initially, the search screen presents a query box with the default for finding words anywhere in free-text fields. This default may be changed to find terms in the author, title, or subject fields. EconLit document type, publication year, or abstract indicator can also limit searches; options for displaying and sorting results are also available. Search Builder is WebSPIRS’ advanced searching option. It very nicely presents two query boxes with drop-down menus for fielded searches that can be combined with Boolean operators. Sufficient online help exists throughout, but I was not successful in printing or otherwise saving information from the Help.

A bar on the right has buttons for a variety of functions including logout, search history, and index search. This particular interface is one of the best for searching both descriptors and JEL classification codes in EconLit. It is easy to browse up and down the index or to select terms for searching. The only shortcoming here is that once a search is completed and results are reported, clicking on index again does not take you back to the index, but requires a new search.

As already noted, search results can be sorted and displayed in a number of ways. There is a nice facility for search management and this includes the ability to save, combine, and load previous searches. From the full record there are hypertext links from the author, source, and publisher, but there are no links from the descriptors. Results can be printed, saved, or e-mailed.

As a general observation, this interface could be more attractive. For example, it is difficult to discern which buttons are active, which is sometimes confusing. And one wonders if this vigorous use of frames is an asset to database searching; it is somewhat bothersome to see truncated frames at every turn.

### Comparison of Sample Search Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CSA</th>
<th>EBSCOhost</th>
<th>OCLC</th>
<th>OVID</th>
<th>SilverPlatter</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Default search</td>
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<tr>
<td>F350 (foreign aid)</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>873</td>
<td>873</td>
<td>861</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Enrichment features include linking between the citation and electronic full-text journals on subscription with the purchase of SilverLinker. Although WebSPIRS does not have its own document delivery facility, it can link to a library’s own in-house document delivery system. WebSPIRS does not check for local library holdings.

**SilverPlatter Pricing**

<table>
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<tr>
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<td>Site license (unlimited)</td>
<td>$3,470</td>
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</table>

Authentication by IP address or password, or a combination of both, and customized login.

**Advisor Additional References**


Jacso, Peter. "Watching your online bottom line." *Online* 20, no. 4 (July/August, 1996): 50.


**Biography**

**Marisa Scigliano** is Technical Services Librarian at Trent University, in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada, where she has been working since 1985. She has a BA from the University of Toronto, an MLS from Dalhousie University, and an MA from Concordia University. Her duties span acquisitions, cataloguing, and serials, and her research interests include the economics of information services and cultural economics.

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**ADVISOR REVIEWS—COMPARATIVE REVIEW**

### A Comparison of the E-journals Tetrahedron Letters and Organic Letters

**Date of Review:** November 20, 2000

<table>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Organic Letters</strong></td>
<td>★★★ 3/4</td>
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**Pricing Options**

**Tetrahedron Letters**

ScienceDirect Web Editions—$8,859 for institution print subscription provides access to the current year of the e-journal.

ScienceDirect Tetrahedron Letters—is available since 1995. Pricing is calculated on a content fee based on current subscription year holdings, a platform fee based on the size of the institution’s user popula-

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**SilverPlatter Information**

100 River Ridge Drive
Norwood, MA 02062-5026
Phone: (800) 343-0064
Fax: (781) 769-8763
<http://www.silverplatter.com>

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**Contact Information**

**Cambridge Scientific Abstracts**

7200 Wisconsin Avenue
Bethesda, MD 20814
Phone: (800) 843-7751 or (301) 961-6700
Fax: (301) 961-6720
<http://www.csa.com>

**EBSCO Information Services**

P.O. Box 1943
Birmingham, AL 35201-1943
Phone: (800) 871-8508 or (508) 356-6500
Fax: (508) 356-5640
<http://www.epnet.com>

**OCLC**

National Sales Division
6565 Frantz Road
Dublin, OH 43017-3395
Phone: (800) 848-5878
Fax: (614) 764-6096
<http://www.oclc.org>

**OVID Technologies, Inc.**

333 Seventh Avenue
New York, NY 10001
Phone: (800) 950-2035
Fax: (212) 563-3784
<http://www.ovid.com>

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**Advisor Additional References**


Jacso, Peter. "Watching your online bottom line." *Online* 20, no. 4 (July/August, 1996): 50.


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<td>Site license (unlimited)</td>
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Authentication by IP address or password, or a combination of both, and customized login.

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- $2438 print only
- $2560 Web access Class C IP
- $4023 Web access site license
- $2926 Print and Web access Class C IP
- $4632 Print and Web access site license