14.9: What are Scholarly Articles?

Learning Objectives

• Describe types of academic sources, including scholarly, peer-reviewed, primary, and secondary sources

Figure 1. Beginning your research with very specific terms will most likely prove unsuccessful. Beginning with a broad search and narrowing down as you go will yield the best results.

The first step in finding good resources is to know what to look for. Sites like Google, Yahoo, and Wikipedia may be good for general searches, but if you want something you can cite in a scholarly paper, you need to find academic sources.
Scholarly and Peer-Reviewed Articles

A scholarly source is an article or book that was written by an expert in the academic field. Most are written by professors or doctoral students for publication in peer-reviewed academic journals.

Figure 2. Major search databases like ProQuest, have checkboxes to narrow search results to only peer-reviewed articles.

The terms “scholarly article” and “peer-reviewed” articles are often used interchangeably, but there is a distinction.

Scholarly articles are written by subject-matter experts, often appear in journals, and include bibliographies, but may be passed off by a review board instead of undergoing the same amount of scrutiny as peer-reviewed articles. Databases typically have a checkbox you can click to search only for peer-reviewed content.

Figure 3. Steps involved in the peer-review process.

Understanding the peer-review process gives insight as to why your instructors want you to focus on these resources.
First, hopeful authors send their article manuscript to the journal editor, a role filled by some prominent scholar in the field. The editor reads over the manuscript and decides whether it seems worthy of peer-review. If it’s not rejected and looks appropriate and of sufficiently high quality, the editor will recruit a few other experts in the field to act as anonymous peer reviewers. The editor will send the manuscript (scrubbed of identifying information) to the reviewers who will read it closely and provide a thorough critique. Reviewers send their comments to the editor who then decides whether to (1) reject the manuscript, (2) ask the author(s) to revise and resubmit the manuscript or (3) accept it for publication. Editors send the reviewers’ comments to authors along with their decisions. A manuscript that has been revised and resubmitted usually goes out for peer-review again; editors often try to get reviews from one or two first-round reviewers as well as a new reviewer. The whole process, from start to finish, can easily take a year, and it is often another year before the paper appears in print.

**Walking to Sources**

*Let’s revisit Marvin’s situation and see what the online professor has to say about finding peer-reviewed articles.*

Marvin: My professor said something about using peer-reviewed articles in scholarly journals.

O-Prof: Professors will often want you to use such sources. Articles in scholarly journals are written by experts; and if a journal’s peer-reviewed, its articles have been screened by other experts (the authors’ peers) before being published.

Marvin: So that would make peer-reviewed articles pretty reliable. Where do I find them?

O-Prof: Google’s got a specialized search engine, Google Scholar, that will search for scholarly articles that might be useful (www.google scholar.com). But often the best place is the college library’s bibliographic databases. A database is a collection of related data, usually electronic, set up for easy access to items in the collection. Library bibliographic databases contain articles from newspapers, magazines, scholarly journals, and other publications. They can be very large, but they’re a lot smaller than the whole Internet, and they generally contain reliable information. The Internet, on the other hand, contains both good and bad information.

Marvin looks down at his feet.

Marvin: Sounds sort of like looking for shoes. When I was buying my running shoes, I went to a specialty running shop instead of a regular shoe store. The specialty shop had all the brands I was looking for, and I didn’t have to weed through sandals and dress shoes. Is that kind of like a library’s bibliographic database?

O-Prof: Exactly. But remember, a database search engine can only find what’s actually in the database. If you’re looking for information on drinking water, you won’t find much in a database full of art history publications. The library has some subject guides that can tell you the best databases to use for your topic.

Marvin: What about books? I did check out the library catalog and found a couple of good books on my topic.

O-Prof: Yes, don’t forget about books. You generally have to walk physically to get information that’s only in print form, or have someone else bring it to you. Even though Google has now scanned many of the world’s books into its database, they won’t give you access to the entire book if the book is still under copyright.

https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Lumen_Learning/Book%3A_English_Composition_1_(Lumen)/14%3A_Module_10%3A...
Marvin: So I’m back to real walking again.

O-Prof: Yes. Don’t forget to ask for help when you’re looking around for sources. Reference librarians make very good guides; it’s their job to keep up on where various kinds of knowledge are located and help people find that knowledge. Professors also make good guides, but they’re most familiar with where to find knowledge in their own fields.

Marvin: I could ask my health and environment professor for help, of course, and maybe my geology and chemistry professors. I’m guessing my music teacher would be less helpful.

O-Prof: One last hint about finding sources. If you find an article or book that’s helpful for your paper, look at its reference list. There might be some useful sources listed there.

Try It

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**Primary and Secondary Sources**

While most scholarly sources are secondary sources, you will sometimes be asked to find primary sources in your research. For this reason, you should understand the differences between primary, secondary, and tertiary sources.

- **Primary sources** allow researchers to get as close as possible to original ideas, events, and empirical research as possible. Such sources may include creative works, first hand or contemporary accounts of events, and the publication of the results of empirical observations or research. These include diaries, interviews, speeches, photographs, etc.

- **Secondary sources** analyze, review, or summarize information in primary resources or other secondary resources. Even sources presenting facts or descriptions about events are secondary unless they are based on direct participation or observation. These include biographies, journal articles, books, and dissertations.

- **Tertiary sources** provide overviews of topics by synthesizing information gathered from other resources. Tertiary resources often provide data in a convenient form or provide information with context by which to interpret it. These are often grouped together with secondary sources. They include encyclopedias and dictionaries.

Types of Sources in Various Disciplines

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