

16.2.4: Scholarly versus Non-Scholarly Sources

Before you begin to research you should be aware of the difference between “scholarly” and “non-scholarly” or popular sources.

Scholarly or academic publications are those where academics publish their research and opinions about topics of concern in their discipline. By and large, scholarly publications are highly specialized periodicals, as many of their titles suggest: *College Composition and Communication*, *Foodservice Research International*, or the *Journal of Analytic Social Work*. Scholarly periodicals tend to be published less frequently than popular sources, perhaps monthly, quarterly, or even less often. For the most part, the readers of scholarly journals are scholars themselves interested in the specific field of the publication—in other words, the articles in these publications are written for academics (both students and teachers) interested in the field, not a “general audience.” Because of the audience, the language of academic journals is often specialized and potentially difficult to understand for a reader not familiar with the field.

Scholarly or academic sources tend to be kind of bland in appearance: other than charts, graphs, and illustrations that appear predominantly in scientific publications, most academic journals include few color photos or flashy graphics. Most academic journals are not published in order to make a profit: while they frequently include some advertising, they usually only include a few ads to offset publication costs. Also, most academic journals are associated with academic organizations or institutions that subsidize and support their publication. Unless you are a subscriber, chances are the only place you will find most of these journals in your college or university library.

Usually, the articles that appear in academic journals indicate where the writer’s evidence comes from with footnotes, end notes, or information in parentheses. Most academic articles end with a “bibliography” or a “works cited” page, which is a list of the research the writer used in his essay. This practice—generally called “citation”—is particularly important in scholarly writing because the main audience of these articles (other scholars) is keenly interested in knowing where the writers got their information. As a member of the academic community, you too will have to follow some system of citation in the research project you do for this and other classes.

Hyperlink: See “Chapter 12: Citing Your Researching Using MLA or APA Style.”

Non-scholarly or popular sources tend to be written by journalists and writers who are not necessarily experts about the subject they are writing about. While there certainly are specialized popular sources, they tend to have names most of us have seen on the magazine racks of grocery and drug stores—*GQ*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Sports Illustrated*, and so on—and even specialized popular sources tend to be written with a more general audience in mind. Writers of popular sources reach a general and broad audience by keeping the style of the writing in their articles approachable to people from a variety of different educational backgrounds—not necessarily members of the academic community.

Many popular periodicals are published weekly and almost all of them are published at least monthly. They tend to be visually appealing with lots of color photographs, graphics, and advertisements. Almost all popular sources are intended to make a profit, and some of the better known periodicals (*Time* or *Newsweek*, for example) sell millions of copies every week. Finally, popular sources rarely provide citation information about where the writer got her information.

Generally speaking, academic and non-academic books have characteristics that are similar to academic and non-academic periodicals. Academic books tend to be written by and for academics, are usually somewhat bland in appearance, tend to be published by companies that are supported by academic institutions, and tend to be only available at academic libraries or specialized bookstores. Non-academic books tend to be written by journalists or other writers trying to reach a more general audience, they are more eye-catching in appearance, they are published by large and for profit publishing companies, and they are more readily available at public libraries and bookstores.

Scholarly versus Non-Scholarly or Popular Sources

Scholarly Sources	Non-Scholarly or Popular Sources
Usually titled according to their specialization (<i>College English</i> , <i>Journal of Analytic Social Work</i> , etc.)	Often titled in ways that have little to do with their focus (<i>Newsweek</i> , <i>Time</i> , <i>People</i> , etc.)
Contain articles written by and for academics with language that is highly specialized for academic readers	Contain articles written by journalists and in a language that is for a non-academic reader
Often published less frequently than monthly	Almost always published at least monthly, and often weekly

Scholarly Sources	Non-Scholarly or Popular Sources
Usually fairly bland in appearance	Visually appealing and attractive in appearance
Generally not published “for profit” and usually supported by an academic organization or institution	Generally published “for profit,” and many well-known popular publications are very profitable; often supported by very large corporations
Almost always available only through subscription or at an academic library	Almost always readily available at bookstores, grocery and convenience stores
Most publish fewer than 5,000 copies of an issue	Many publish tens of thousands of copies each issue
Its articles follow some sort of citation system (MLA or APA, for example) that allow its readers to know where the writer’s research comes from	Very rarely contain any sort of citation information that allows readers to know where writers found their information

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