

# HOW CAN I TELL IF MY SOURCE IS SCHOLARLY?

## Introduction

For most of your assignments, you are expected to use scholarly sources. You might also hear them called academic or peer-reviewed.

So, when you've found an article or book, how do you know whether it is scholarly? This video will give you some tips so you can recognize a scholarly source when you see one.

The best way is to use sources you found through databases on the Library's web site. But even then, not everything you find will be scholarly.

Scholarly or academic sources are written for a university audience. That includes researchers and students like yourself. This is a fairly specialized audience, so these sources tend to be different from things written for a wider, more popular audience.

Scholarly sources all tend to share a few characteristics. In particular, they have similar types of authors, content, and references. We'll look at each of these.

## Authors

Books or articles that aren't scholarly don't always have an author listed. Or, they tell us who the author is, but don't tell us anything else about the person. Sometimes, the author is identified as a professional writer, a journalist, or a bestselling author.

By contrast, scholarly works will always have an author listed. The author is normally an expert researcher who works at a university or a research institute. We are always given the university they work at, and often some other information about the person's authority and qualifications on the subject they are writing about.

## Content

Scholarly works also have a few differences in content from other types of sources.

For one, they usually have an abstract, which is a short summary of the article given at the beginning.

For another, because they are written for a well-educated university audience, the language is usually more complex and technical.

The content is different too. Scholarly books and articles report the results of original research done by the authors.

## Structure

Scholarly articles tend to have a certain format and structure. Articles in the sciences or in areas like psychology, political science, or sociology, have the most distinct structure. They normally contain a few standard sections. They usually start with some kind of introduction. Then, they describe the methods they used to do their research study. These methods usually consist of an experiment, a survey, observation, or interviews. Next, these articles usually discuss the results or findings of their research. Often, this involves some statistics.

Frequently, the article includes tables and charts summarizing some of the results. Finally, after the results section, there is usually a final section discussing the implications and importance of the findings.

In some other subjects, like literature, film, philosophy, or communication studies, scholarly articles look a bit different. They still have authors affiliated with universities, complex language, and content that is original. The content isn't always the result of an experiment or survey, though. Instead, it might be a critical analysis of a film, event, or work, or an original argument. These articles have a less predictable structure than the ones which discuss experiments or surveys.

## References

One thing all scholarly sources have in common are the references. Scholarly books and articles always contain a great many references to other books and articles. The authors mention these in the text, and list them at the end in a bibliography or list of references.

## Imposters

One easy way to be sure your articles are scholarly is to search using the library databases and limit your results to Peer-reviewed articles. This isn't perfect though. You'll still sometimes see things that aren't scholarly. These can be trickier to distinguish because they do have some characteristics of scholarly sources.

One example is a dissertation. These are written by students as a requirement for a graduate degree (either an MA or PhD). They have university authors, scholarly content and structure, and lots of references to other sources. The issue with them is that they haven't been peer-reviewed, which is a process where other experts in the field review it to be sure it is good enough to publish. Sometimes dissertations are useful, but you'll need to check with your professor to see if you can use one as a scholarly source.

Another example is a review article. These normally discuss and review one or a few books. They are by university authors and refer to scholarly sources, but they are not considered scholarly sources. That's because they don't present the author's original research; they only talk about someone else's research. If you find one that looks good, make sure you find the book it talks about and use it instead of the review.

## You decide

Now you try to decide. Find sample article #1 on this page and decide whether it's scholarly or not. When you've decided, click yes or no to continue.

The answer is no, this article isn't scholarly. The author doesn't have any affiliation or qualifications listed. The language is clear and written for a broader audience. There is no abstract. The article doesn't claim to contain original research done by the author. Finally, there are no references to other books and articles.

Let's try one more time. Find sample article #2 on this page, and decide whether it's scholarly or not. Once you've decided, press yes or no to continue.

The answer is yes, this article is scholarly. Unlike the first one, the authors' affiliation is listed, and they are from a university. The language is more complex, and there is an abstract. Though this isn't an experiment, the authors present an original argument supported by research. And last but not least, there are many references to other sources.

## More information & help

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