Teach Yourself: Understanding Scholarly Sources

When conducting research it is important to distinguish between journal articles and magazine articles. Journal articles are typically referred to as "scholarly," while magazine articles are usually considered "popular." A third category, "trade" magazines or journals, are written for professionals in a particular field but are not strictly research-related.

Below are additional criteria to consider when differentiating between journals and magazines.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Scholarly Journal</th>
<th>Popular Magazine</th>
<th>Trade Magazine/Journal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example Journal</td>
<td>Ecology</td>
<td>New Scientist</td>
<td>BioCycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Cover</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Stated Purpose</td>
<td>&quot;Established in 1920, Ecology publishes research and synthesis papers on all aspects of ecology, with particular emphasis on papers that develop new concepts in ecology.&quot; Published monthly by the Ecological Society of America</td>
<td>&quot;Featuring a selection of the latest news stories from the worlds of science and technology&quot; Published weekly</td>
<td>&quot;BioCycle is recognized worldwide for its authoritative coverage on composting, organics recycling, anaerobic digestion, renewable energy and community sustainability.&quot; Published monthly</td>
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<tr>
<td>Example Article Title</td>
<td>&quot;Differential Impacts of Wildfire on the Population Dynamics of an Old-forest Species&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Trump’s anti-science era begins&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Economic Impact of Food Scraps Diversion&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td>$1203 USD/year (12 issues)</td>
<td>$99 CND/year (52 issues)</td>
<td>$79 USD/year (11 issues)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>Academics and Professionals</td>
<td>General public</td>
<td>People in the business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authors</td>
<td>Experts or specialists (PhD). Unpaid.</td>
<td>Journalists, staff writers, or freelance writers. Paid.</td>
<td>Staff writers, industry specialists, or vendor representatives. Usually paid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References/Works Cited</td>
<td>Almost always</td>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>Sometimes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

KPU Library’s guide developed by Chris Burns (Revised June 2017 by Celia Brinkerhoff (Revised February 2018/cb)
Based on “Teach Yourself: Understanding Scholarly Sources” created by North Carolina State University Libraries.
Is this a scholarly (peer-reviewed) journal article? Ask yourself:

Authors:

- Are the authors’ names given?
  - Scholarly articles are NEVER anonymous.
- Does it indicate on the first or last page of the article where at least one of the authors does his/her research?
  - Almost all scholarly articles are written by people doing research at a university or other research organization. Their “affiliation” will be listed in the article.

Length:

- How many pages long is the article?
  - Scholarly articles tend to be quite long. They will almost never be less than 5-pages long.

Content:

- Is there a short summary (called an abstract) at the beginning of the article?
  - Almost all scholarly articles will have an abstract which summarizes the key points of the article.
- Is it written for people who are already familiar with this subject?
  - Scholarly articles are written by experts for other experts. Authors assume that you are familiar with the vocabulary used by people doing research in this area. This means that the articles can be difficult to read if you are new to the topic.
- Are there tables and charts? [Common but not essential]
  - Original research articles will have a detailed methodology section and will often display findings in tables and charts.
  - Articles that summarize research done by other people may not have these.

Citations:

- Are there a lot of in-text citations to scholarly sources in the article?
  - ALL scholarly articles will include MANY in-text citations (or footnotes/endnotes) where the authors give credit to the source of an idea. Usually this in-text citation only lists the author’s last name(s), year of publication, and (if it’s a direct quotation) a page number.
  - This is essential in scholarly writing. When you take an idea from someone else – even if you put it into your own words – you MUST cite it. If you don’t, you are plagiarizing. This is a serious academic offence.
- Is there a long list of references (or Works Cited) at the end of the article?
  - You will always find a long list of references at the end of a scholarly article which provide all the citation details that you would need in order to find the exact source that the author used.
  - Note: if the author is using footnotes, they may put the full citation in the footnote, and not need to have a list of references at the end.