

Popular vs. Scholarly Articles

How do I tell the difference between popular and scholarly articles?

Sometimes instructors tell you to limit your research to "scholarly" articles, but what does that mean? This guide will help you in making the distinction between popular and scholarly sources.

Note: There is often a grey area between these categories, so exercise your judgment and critical thinking in evaluating your information sources.

A popular magazine or newspaper usually fits these criteria:

- Articles are usually written by a journalist.
- Articles are written to be understandable to a wide audience. The author writes in simple language and assumes that the reader may not know much about the topic.
- Articles rarely include a bibliography but sources may be mentioned informally within the article (for example, "John Doe commented that...").
- The purpose of the article is to entertain, to report news, or to summarize information.
- Magazines and newspapers are usually published by a commercial publisher.
- Magazines are usually published weekly or monthly; newspapers are usually published daily or weekly.
- Magazines and newspapers usually have many advertisements and photographs.

Examples of popular magazines:



A scholarly/academic/peer reviewed journal usually fits these criteria:

- Articles are written by researchers and subject experts; author affiliations will be listed.
- Most articles are approved for publication by the process of **peer review**, whereby the author submits the article to the journal and the article is reviewed by other subject experts to verify that its methodology is sound and that its conclusions are valid. This process helps to ensure a high level of quality and academic rigor in the articles that are published. Peer reviewed journals are sometimes called **refereed** journals.
- Articles are written for other members of the academic discipline: researchers, professors, and students. Language will include jargon, terms, and/or statistical figures that are commonly used in the discipline. The author will assume that the reader has a certain level of knowledge about the field and the topic at hand.
- The purpose of the article is to report research and scholarly ideas and to add to the body of scholarly knowledge about the subject.
- Articles will include a bibliography, and in some disciplines (especially physical sciences and social sciences), will follow a strict structure that includes an abstract, research methodology, data, and a discussion of the results and implications of the research.
- Academic journals are usually published by university presses or professional organizations.
- Academic journals are usually published monthly or quarterly (four times a year), but may be published at other intervals (weekly, bimonthly, yearly, etc.)

Examples of scholarly journals:



Source: This handout is adapted from: "How do I tell the difference between scholarly, trade, and popular articles or books?." Western New England University D'Amour Library. D'Amour Library, n.d. Web. 2 Jan 2014.

What about trade/professional sources?

A professional or trade publication usually fits these criteria:

- Articles are written by members of the profession or trade, or by specialized journalists or technical writers.
- Articles are written for other members of the profession or trade. Language may include jargon and terms that are commonly used in the profession/trade. The author will assume that the reader has a certain level of knowledge about the field.
- The purpose of the article is to inform those working in the field/profession of events, techniques, and other professional issues.
- Articles may occasionally include a bibliography.
- Trade publications are often published by the professional/trade associations for the field.

How do I know if an article is considered scholarly/peer-reviewed?

Most of the article databases at COS are from a company called EBSCO. EBSCO makes it easy to tell if an article is from a peer-reviewed journal. Follow these 7 simple steps:



1. Go to the Library's [Articles & Databases](#) page
2. Click on the EBSCO article database you want to search; you will need to log in with your mySiskiyous username and password if you are working from off campus
3. Type in your search
4. Click on the title of the article you are interested in using
5. The name of the journal or magazine that published the article is listed in the **Source** line; click on the name of the journal/magazine
6. Scroll down to the bottom of the list of Publication Details; at the bottom of the list is a line called **Peer Reviewed** which will either say **Yes** (is peer reviewed) or **No** (not peer reviewed)
7. To go back to the article, click the **Back** button

The screenshot shows a search result for the article "Emergency care of children and adults with head injury" in the Nursing Standard journal. The interface includes a search bar, a list of results, and a detailed view of the selected article. Numbered callouts (4-7) highlight key features: 4 points to the search bar, 5 points to the article title and source information, 6 points to the "Peer Reviewed: Yes" status, and 7 points to the EBSCO logo and "Back" button.

Searching Tip:

You don't have to check every article! If you know from the start that you only want articles that are from scholarly sources, check the **Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals (Peer Reviewed) Journals** box on the first search screen. Or look for it in the **Limit To** area in the left sidebar (on search results screens).

The screenshot shows the "Limit To" sidebar with the "Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals" checkbox checked. Other options include "Full Text" and "Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journals".