

Analyzing Journal Articles

Scholarly or academic journals are essential resources for doing academic research. While popular magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report* are excellent sources of information on nearly any topic, they are written with the average reader in mind and do not include the depth of coverage that an academic researcher would need. For in-depth examination of a topic, academic, scholarly publications should be the researcher's first choice.

What Is a Scholarly Journal?

Scholarly journals, like magazines, are published periodically, ranging in frequency from monthly to quarterly or even only twice yearly. The key differences between magazines and journals are that journals are written for and by experts in their chosen field and that they focus on a particular research interest, such as experimental psychology or aerodynamics. Scholarly journals are published in every academic discipline and are used as a means for scholars and researchers to share their research and discoveries with others who are also experts in their discipline. In the course of publishing their own research, academics will review the work of other experts and will also raise challenging questions about areas of their disciplines that can be pursued in future research. In short, scholarly journals provide a sounding board for those involved in deeply exploring any academic discipline.

By nature, scholarly journals are written in a style different from popular magazines. Since they are addressed to a specialized audience, articles published in scholarly journals are infused with the language of the discipline on which they focus. Articles written for experts in psychology, for example, will utilize the specialized vocabulary used by psychologists in their study of human behavior. This makes them largely inaccessible to the lay reader, but, then, these articles are not written for the lay reader in the first place, but for experts in the field. Important studies published in scholarly journals will be reported in the popular press in magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, but the reports of the studies in the popular press greatly simplify the findings so that the general ideas are easily accessible to any reader. Not so, the scholarly journals. Here the results of the studies are published in great detail using the specialized language available to experts in the field. Data collected and analyzed as part of the study will also be included in the published results.

When to Use Scholarly Journals

Academic research projects are best completed using research articles. Research articles are published in scholarly journals rather than in the popular press. The point of doing an academic research project is to gain a better understanding of the current state of research in a particular area and to put forth new ideas that will further enhance understanding of the subject. Research feeds on other research. A researcher will typically review the available literature on a topic of interest prior to launching into a further investigation or into a new investigation. This process of examining existing literature in an area of interest is known as a literature review. The process of reviewing the literature helps the researcher



understand what else needs to be discovered about the chosen topic and uncovers gaps in knowledge about the topic that the current research can then attempt to fill in. In some cases, a writer might do just the literature review to inform other experts in the field of the current state of knowledge. In most cases, however, the literature review is the launching pad from which a researcher proceeds into an original study of other topic issues or aspects.

Master's projects and dissertations always begin with literature reviews. These advanced degree projects rely heavily on scholarly publications for material and are written with the idea of furthering the discussion within an academic discipline. Scholarly journals should also be the first choice of any college researcher working on completing an academic research project, regardless of the length of the project.

Assessing the Potential Value of a Journal Article: What To Look For?

While there are many things to consider when assessing the value of a journal article, some primary considerations include:

Authorship -- Journal articles are typically written by experts in a field for other experts in a field. For example, a professor holding an advanced degree in biology will have a specialty that he or she routinely researches. The results of a research study done by the professor will likely be written up in the form of an academic article that will be submitted for publication to a scholarly journal in biology, such as *Applied Biochemistry and Microbiology* or *Integrative Biology*. If the article is accepted for publication by the journal, it will find publication in an upcoming issue of the journal. In most cases, the first page of the article will give some details about the author(s). Who is this person? What degrees does the researcher have? With which university or research institution is this person affiliated? This will help other researchers better assess the qualifications of the author of the article. Another way to gauge the importance of the author is to look for other articles published by the same author in other academic/scholarly journals. If the author is widely-published, this is an indicator of expertise in his or her subject matter.

Abstract -- Most academic journals preface their articles with abstracts or summaries of the article content. In many cases, the abstract will be written by the article author. An abstract will give an overview of what is covered in the article. It will also help another researcher determine if the article is primarily a literature review, if it is a quantitative or qualitative study, and if it reflects empirical research. Most research articles begin with a literature review. What of note has been published on the current or related topics and what was the value to present knowledge of the subject? This is the primary question addressed in the literature review. A researcher engaged in his or her own original research will always survey what has been done previously so as to have a solid foundation upon which to build. Some articles may focus solely on surveying existing literature on a particular topic. These can be very useful to a researcher who wants to quickly scan previous studies and then update the research for purposes of a new study.

While abstracts are very commonly included at the beginning of journal articles, the absence of an abstract does not necessarily exclude the article from being a journal article. Some journals might not require an abstract for an included article.

Documentation -- Since the literature survey is an important part of any research article, this means that the article will include a, sometimes extensive, bibliography. The thoroughness of the literature survey can be gauged by the exhaustiveness of the bibliography. In cases where the topic is relatively unusual or very new, there might not be a wealth of existing literature. Typically that will come out in both the abstract and in the literature survey portion of the article.

In some cases, documentation might be in the form of footnotes or endnotes and there might not be a formal bibliography at the end of the article. This depends entirely on the format deemed acceptable by the publishing journal.

Article date -- The date of the article is critical. A researcher hoping to launch a new study of the effect of music on academic achievement will want to review the most recent research completed on that topic before launching into a new study. This is not to say that older articles have no value, only that every effort should be made to uncover the latest research that has been published.

What to keep track of to adequately cite an academic journal article:

Article title

Author's name

Journal title

Volume and issue numbers

Date

Inclusive pages for the article

From where the article was retrieved (print, web, library database, etc.)

Date when the article was retrieved (especially if it was found on the open Internet)

Gutenberg, much book history remained *terra incognita*. Undaunted by the challenge and heartened by the signs of "rapid progress" at the preconference, the signers summoned researchers of many countries to the task. In this collaborative effort, numerous hands were needed:

repeats the role we saw it play with the online catalog, accentuating a development already ongoing in print. In this instance, electronic media may be reshaping our approach to the past. If so, we would do well to consult the 1980 "Boston Statement on the History of the Book" and be reminded that without the book trade and its products, we would have no scholarly field.

Notes

1. Elizabeth L. Eisenstein. *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformation in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 2 vols.; Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie, 1775–1800* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979).

2. For a brief description of the Library of Congress's Center for the Book, see its Website (<http://lcweb.loc.gov/loc/cfbook>); the American Antiquarian Society gives an overview of the Program in the History of the Book in American Culture at a gopher site ([gopher://mark.mwa.org](http://mark.mwa.org)).

3. The Center for the Book's Website provides access to information about book history and book arts programs at home and abroad.

4. A brief description of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing (SHARP) is available at its Website (<http://www.indiana.edu/~sharp/intro.html>).

5. Kenneth E. Carpenter, ed., *Books and Society in History: Papers of the Association of College and Research Libraries Rare Books and Manuscripts Section Preconference 24–28 June 1980, Boston, Massachusetts* (N.Y. and London: R.R. Bowker Company, 1983); William L. Joyce, David D. Hall, Richard D. Brown, and John B. Hench, eds., *Printing and Society in Early America* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1983), ix.

6. Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin. *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450–1800*; trans. David Gerard (London: New Left Books, 1976). The volume was originally published 18 years before as *L'Apparition du Livre* (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1958).

7. "A Statement on the History of the Book," in Carpenter, ed., *Books and Society in History*, xi–xii.

8. "A Statement on the History of the Book," xi–xiii; Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).



COMMUNICATIONS REVOLUTIONS: WRITING A HISTORY OF THE BOOK FOR AN ELECTRONIC AGE

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Originally presented as the keynote address for the Rare Books and Manuscript Preconference on June 25, 1997, in Claremont, California.

When does an academic field begin? For the expanding specialty known as the history of the book, the landmarks are many:

- Major publications: Elizabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* and Robert Darnton's *The Business of Enlightenment*, both appearing in 1979.¹

- Intellectual centers: the Center for the Book at the Library of Congress (1977) and the Program in the History of the Book in American Culture at the American Antiquarian Society (1983).²

- Encyclopedias and reference works: since the appearance in the 1980s of the multivolume *Histoire de l'Édition*, the French pioneer in the field, national book histories have been launched in the United States, England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada.

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Example of a journal article from the publication *Rare Books & Manuscripts Librarianship*, volume 13, number 1, (Fall 1998): pp. 8 – 24. Notice the notes page that begins on page 21 of the journal. There is no separate bibliography for this article.

Reading by Jim Alderman. Updated March 2014.